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Medals and Ribbons

A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS

(ENGLISH QUARTERLY)

"50 YEARS AFTER THE 1971 WAR"

Special Commemorative Issue





1971

The Liberation of Bangladesh

- Momentous Times with Manekshaw - An Aide Recalls.
- Dhaka in His Sights - Gen Sagat Singh's Disruptive Tempo

FOUNDER'S NOTE

Col David Devasahayam



The Third of December 1971...I was an eleven-year-old Army brat and my brother John (older by three years) and I were attending school at Ferozpur, a small border town of Punjab. We had a nice home with a large compound and with war clouds looming on the horizon, a deep shelter trench had been dug by Dad's men. Dad himself had been mobilised with his Field Ambulance to the Khemkaran Sector near Amritsar. At around 6 pm in the evening, we heard the sound of machine guns being fired at the Hussainiwala border and soon we could hear the sound of Pakistani Medium Artillery shells overflying and exploding on targets deeper in Ferozpur. Mother and we boys took shelter in our trench. The war had begun. The next day, Mother took the decision that we should leave Ferozpur and we took a train to Ambala to wait out the war with some of our service friends who lived there.



In a few days, the war was conclusively over. Bangladesh had been liberated. My brother and I would stay glued to our transistor as India decisively moved into East Pakistan. Looming over the entire war was the charismatic figure of the Chief of the Army Staff, General (later Field Marshal) Sam Manekshaw. In those heady days following the war, my mind was made up that I would join the Army and as luck would have it, I would join the Field Marshal's own battalion "The Second Battalion of the Eighth Gorkha Rifles", the **Sikand Aite** in 1980.

The 1971 war was without doubt the Indian Military's most glorious moment. The ignominy of the 1962 Indo-China war was wiped away. With fifty years having elapsed since that glorious victory, we at **Medals & Ribbons** felt it would be appropriate to commemorate the victory with this hardbound Special Edition. This is a labour of love and it has been a nostalgic journey putting this together with tri-Service contributions. One iconic ingredient has been the personal account of Ninety-Two-year-old war hero Lt Gen Anand Sarup, PVSM, MVC (also from Sikand Aite) who lucidly recounts his ad hoc Brigade's liberation of Chittagong, besides very aptly writing this issue's Reflections.

An aspect which stands out in the 1971 war is the close trust, open communication and understanding between Mrs Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister and Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw. This led to very clear guidelines and expectations leaving no ambiguity in the conduct of operations, resulting in a decisive victory. Even tri-Service integration and jointmanship, though there was no office of a Chief of Defence Staff at that time, was a definite reason for this victory. There are so many other such contributory aspects which find mention between the covers of this edition.

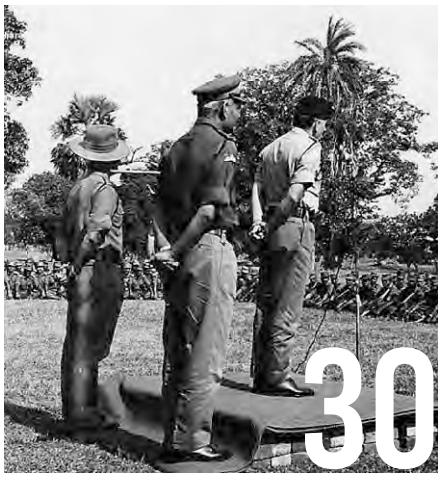
Well, we have put this together with a lot of care and I hope it will find a lasting place in your homes and libraries !

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Medals and Ribbons
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EDITOR'S NOTE



Lt Gen J S Sandhu, (Retd).

In 1971, an eventful year in the South Asian sub-continent, we witnessed hordes of refugees streaming across from East Pakistan into India, consequent to the genocide by the Pakistani Army. Bengali patriots in East Pakistan joined hands with the Indian Armed Forces to form the Mukti Bahini, and in December 1971, the Indian Armed Forces blazed through East Pakistan to the gates of Dhaka. Bangladesh was liberated – a historic moment.

Today, 50 years later, we bring to you an exclusive *"Souvenir Issue"*, entirely focused on the 1971 Indo Pak War. The most important battles and engagements of the war have been strung together vividly to give the readers a memorable insight. As I ponder over the War, I realize that there are important takeaways, valid even today.

Just Cause. Any violent conflict has to have an acceptable reason, even the global superpower had to develop the 'Weapons of Mass Destruction" story to justify their intervention in Saddam's Iraq. The **Just Cause** of atrocities in East Pakistan, the refugee problem and will of the people in East Pakistan enabled the Indian State to garner acceptability in the world fora, despite the existing bias of Western powers.

Preparations and Readiness. Manekshaw clearly enunciated the necessity to go to war when ready and at an opportune time, not in haste. In recent decades, post the Parliament attack in December 2001, a lot of debate has taken place on the *'Cold Start Doctrine'*, and on retaliatory response. Are the Forces ready for a Cold Start? Would the enemy be caught unaware or unprepared? Post Mumbai 26/11, or Uri September 2016, or Pulwama February 2019, the enemy too raised his vigil, expecting retaliation. **Yet a major terror incident provides the Just Cause for retaliation, and the retaliation will need to be executed in an acceptable timeframe despite an alert and vigilant foe.** *Punitive response though may often involve a smaller sized force,* and may not lead to war. It may be appropriate for the Indian Armed Forces to maintain a fully ready (no local duties/commitments) **"Rapid Contingency Force"** for such a scenario. And the Armed Forces should simultaneously be ready for escalation. Future conflicts may well progress up an escalatory continuum, as happened in 1962, 1965 and 1971. In 1971, border skirmishes and border violations increased from end October onwards, and then escalated to full scale war. *But the underlying principle would remain that the Armed Forces should be ready for the possible conflict situations, logistically and training wise, and escalation must be controlled based on the readiness.*

Planning and Execution. *'No plan survives contact'* is an oft quoted maxim, and will invariably be true in future too. So, execution is far more important, and actions/reactions vary as per the changing circumstances. In some of the articles in this issue, the reader will observe dissonance amongst commanders at places, while the plans were being formulated and even during

EDITOR'S NOTE

the war. In his strategic overview, my colleague Rear Admiral Shrikhande has pointed out that such "inter personal friction" is beneficial, as it develops better options. Variation in opinion and such disagreement is not to be deemed a failing or a weakness of the superior or subordinate, and Manekshaw too often cautioned us on the danger of 'yes men'. The readers might notice that the initial plans were conservative, not based on Dhaka as the objective. Nothing amiss in such an approach, as commanders are wary about how the conflict will play out – there may be far more resistance than assessed. However, **even if plans are conservative, execution must be bold – every opportunity, every viable risk taken,** as taken by Gonsalves and 23 Infantry Division when infiltrating through a 10 km gap between Lalmai and Laksham.

Boldness and Risk Taking. Many other examples of boldness and taking risks were seen in this war, and Indian Armed Forces leaders rose to the occasion, raising the tempo of operations substantially. We have covered some of these notable high risk operations like the raid on Chachro, Sylhet heliborne operation and the mercurial pace of advance and crossing the Meghna River by 4 Corps in this issue. As a takeaway, we must encourage risk taking and initiative, and reward young officers and men who display aggressiveness, bravado and valour in combat situations – like the young men who charged at the PLA troops in Galwan despite being outnumbered. A 'zero error, play safe' attitude needs to be discouraged.

Tenacity. There were many fierce, intense battles during the conflict, and tenacity was visible in both the armies with heavy casualties at places like Chhamb, Basantar, Hilli, Akhaura and Sylhet, to name a few. Wherever leaders were in the forefront along with the troops, displaying courage and motivation, the rank and file fought tooth and nail, not giving an inch to the enemy. We need to keep this aspect in mind for future battles with Pakistan. Fortunately, the Indian Forces have not been found lacking in such leadership, amply highlighted in Kargil 99 too. Our Academies, units and Regimental ethos nurtures such leadership traits and courage.

Airpower. Since the Second World War, airpower has been the deciding factor in victory. Complete air dominance achieved by the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the Eastern Theatre enabled the Indian Army to execute heliborne and airborne operations and raise the tempo multifold. At Longewala too, airpower played a decisive role. The commitment and courage of IAF pilots as they entered hostile airspace often was commendable.

The Navy too displayed matching offensive spirit as they bottled up the Pakistan Navy in Karachi, the Karachi strikes have been covered in this issue. The leadership of Commanding Officers of all the three Services needs to be specifically acknowledged, the war threw up combat leaders of repute.

Mukti Bahini. The Mukti Bahini was *India's Force Multiplier* in East Pakistan, and they enabled the Indian Army to move swiftly through alternate routes, provided intelligence and logistic support, while also fighting along with our soldiers. We commend their immense role.

A Confident Leader. Manekshaw's charisma and confidence was infectious. He visited the units and troops before the war and developed bonding and bonhomie amongst the rank and file. Sam was confident of victory, he had assured the Prime Minister too. He was launching three Corps into East Pakistan from three different directions, besides a Force from the North too and knew that the initial battles near the borders would break through the crust of enemy defences. Thereafter, as his forces moved in deeper, the enemy defensive framework would crumble – and this is what transpired. As described in the article *"Duo at the Helm",* he described this strategy as **'Expanding torrent'** in a press conference after the war.

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Lest We Forget. The Medals and Ribbons Team bows in tribute and humbly salutes the sacrifice of all the soldiers, sailors and airmen who were killed in action in the 1971 War. The nation remains indebted to them.

In our next issue, we will dwell on Disaster Relief and Rescue Operations as the primary theme. Articles related to this theme may be mailed to chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com

- Lt Gen J S Sandhu, (Retd).



Mukti Bahini patrol in East Pakistan, photo credit en.samakal.com/Bangladesh

THE STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN 1971

A War Well-thought & Well-fought

There were many facets and factors which came into play, when the Indian State faced the East Pakistani turmoil situation and took the military intervention decision. This article provides an overview that links the strategic with operational levels.

The December 1971 Indo-Pakistan war has been cited by the military ethicist, Michael Walzer as a fine example of a just and moral war. He writes that *"its various motives converged on a single course of action that was also the course of action called for by the Bengalis. This convergence explains why the Indians were in and out of the country so quickly, defeating the Pakistani army but not replacing it and imposing no political control on the emergent state of Bangladesh."* (Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars).

Outlining the Process from Strategy Formulation to "Breaking Things"

Military men are conversant with the phrase "courses of action" as the outputs deduced from a complex planning process that derives its initial directions from the highest levels of government duly involving the three service headquarters, intelligence agencies and para-military forces. The military-strategic plans are then formulated for operational planning and finally, the fighting is done at the tactical level of warfare. This level is where steel meets steel, where sophisticated missiles fired by aircraft and ships or rapid firing tanks and artillery destroy the enemy or small





(Left) Gen Yahya Khan with Lt Gen Abdul Hamid Khan in East Pakistan, credit Dawn file photo
(Right) A Mukti Bahini boat patrol, photo credit Londoni Worldwide Ltd.

groups of soldiers, armed with machine guns, rifles or even deadly khukris. What our valorous armed forces engaged in was the real stuff which is about putting ordnance on target and of avoiding being targets for the enemy's ordnance. Some have said that at the tactical level battle is about trying to *"break things and kill people."* In a sense it is a stark but relevant definition. Armed forces use instruments of violence with precision, speed, efficiency, all this within the laws of war in which the Indian Armed Forces have a stellar reputation.

Pakistan's Conundrums

This 15th August is the beginning of our 75th year as Independent India, an India that was born in religious turmoil with more than a million deaths in 1947. India chose to remain secular despite an overwhelming Hindu population but Pakistan was created as an Islamic State. The two wings, West and East Pakistan (WP/EP) shared a majoritarian religion, but had very little cultural, ethnic or linguistic commonalities and their geographical separation with India as "no-man's land" exacerbated these divides. Democracy in Pakistan had been periodically hijacked by the Army and a federal structure could not take effective roots. Eventually, in an attempt to restore democracy, General Yahya Khan, the military ruler, called for elections in December 1970. The outcome, however, was a shock to the dominant WP ruling elite since the Sheikh's party, Awami League, won a clear majority in the federal as well as provincial assemblies and ought to have formed the government in Islamabad. Since the verdict was not palatable to practically anyone in WP, a political stalemate quickly led to violent protests in the East, sliding into a civil war. The story of Pakistani repression in EP is a long and tragic one. India was flooded with nearly 10 million refugees and this put a huge strain. We were a poor country then with food shortages and localised famines in 1967-68.

The Politico-Strategic Canvas

It was difficult for India to remain passive to the genocide, the trampling of democracy and burden of refugees. The Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi realised very early in 1971 that a conflict with Pakistan might be the only answer to the problem. But international support for India was hard to obtain. To garner moral, financial and diplomatic support, Mrs Gandhi herself visited a few capitals as did foreign minister Swaran Singh and other senior diplomats. Many countries expressed sympathy, but were loath to openly support India. For years after the war, archives and books written globally pointed to the very anti-Indian views of the then US President Nixon and his adviser, Henry Kissinger. Given America's tilt towards Pakistan, some counter-balance was required. It consequently became necessary for India to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR on 09 August 1971. India's non-alignment now remained only as rhetoric. In one of his books, JN Dixit(later the National Security Advisor) pointed out that *"Seventeen resolutions were introduced in the UN on the Bangladesh crisis—four in the General Assembly and thirteen in the Security Council—between 4 and 7 December. Thirteen more resolutions were introduced in the Security Council between 12 and 21 December."* There were limits to the length to which India could ignore the Security Council or count on the Soviet Union ability to keep using the veto.

Thus, at the theatre-strategic and operational levels, time was a severe constraint to be compensated by force and speed of prosecution in the defined space of the conflict.

Deriving Indian Strategic Objectives

At the political level, the cabinet was clear-eyed that it was time to do what it might take to create a new country out of EP as per its peoples' aspiration. Sardar Swaran Singh, the very under-stated and capable Foreign Minister phrased it clearly: *"It is quite clear that refugees will never go back if the present regime (i.e. the military regime in Dhaka) continues. Therefore, this regime must be replaced by a regime that is responsible to the people…Our ultimate objective is that this regime must give way to a regime that is truly representative of the Awami League."* This was not some vaguely worded or rhetorical enunciation; it enabled deriving clear political-military objectives and the creation of corresponding strategies.

Two-Theatre War & Multi-Front Concerns

The cabinet had to consider a complicated set of circumstances and desired end-states. The overall higher

combat power vis-à-vis Pakistan was not too preponderant either. Fundamentally, this would be a multi-front war in two 'theatres' EP and WP, that were separated by more than 3000 kms. There was the China theatre too with a frontage of another 4500 km. Due to a much closer Sino-Pakistan relationship in 1971 and older, unsettled issues with China, the government and Army could not take any chances. Six divisions were still retained against China.

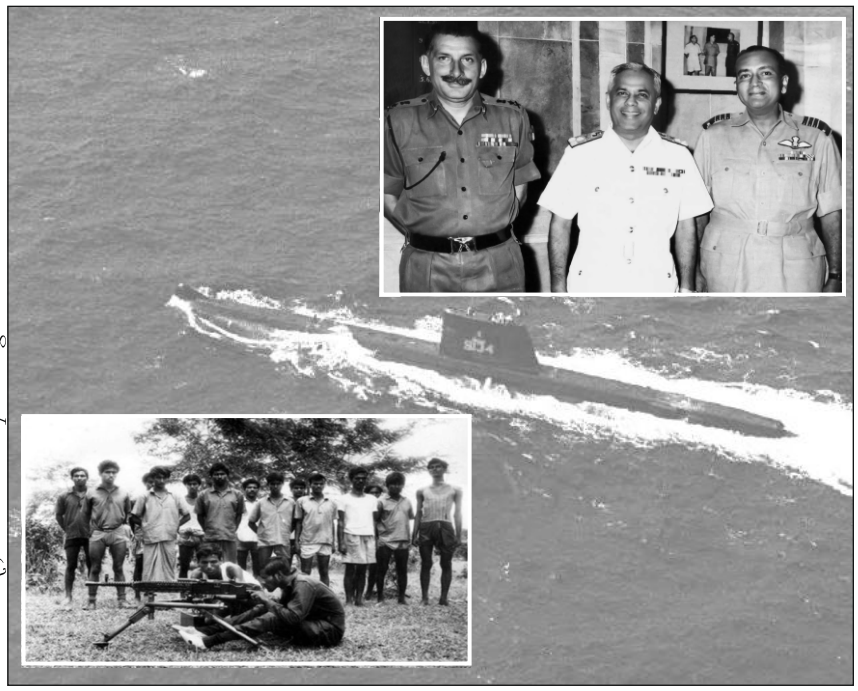
Indian Objectives

Considering the complicated geo-strategic spread, EP would be the primary theatre and its speedy liberation became the main objective. Along the border with WP, the objectives would be limited. The Indian leadership avoided any major aims in the West because that could further increase international opposition and because there were not enough forces to leverage victory by retaking Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK). Given the forces needed for liberation of EP and for deployment along the Chinese border, the margin of superiority in the West was not substantially higher. Also, a collapsing WP would have invited world power interference. Bangladeshi leadership on the other hand, was already identified and supported by India. Most significantly, it had the popular mandate of the East Pakistanis. Therefore, the limited objectives in the West were to deter and repel any Pakistani offensives, maintain an essentially strategic defensive posture and capture limited territory for post-war leverage.

The unusual arrangement of limited and unlimited objectives against the same country is an extremely rare case of escalation management, multi-theatre operations, international environment, measure of victory and war termination.

Pakistan's Objectives

Pakistan's military ruler, General Yahya Khan did not plan strategically at the political and military levels. Had he deluded himself into underestimating the Indian build-up in the EP—or he thought it was lost anyway? Besides, he didn't have any superiority in any sector of the India-WP border to enable significant local victories and thus thwart Indian aims in the East. Shortcomings in strategic competence and incoherent operational plans can rarely be overcome by tactical prowess or unit-level bravery. Owen Jones, writing in 2002 has observed, *"...with the exception of the Rann of Kutch campaign in 1965, the Pakistani Army has consistently failed to achieve its military objectives..(its) record in developing military strategy is atrocious."* At best, Pakistan could have hoped to delay Indian progress to a point where international concerns, combined with Security Council resolutions could have kept India away from its objective. However, a diplomatic strategy can be complimentary to,
but not a substitute for a military strategy, if war seems inevitable. Clearly, Pakistan had identified no Indian Centres of Gravity (COGs) in formulating its strategy. Excessive reliance on successful diplomacy, hoping for international opinion or even bluster to thwart an adversary is always questionable. Saddam Hussein went down the same road that Yahya took in 1971.



PNS Ghazi, credit en.wikipedia.org

(Upper inset) Gen Manekshaw, Adm AK Chatterji and Air Chief Marshal PC Lal. (Lower inset) Mukti Bahini Training 22 July 1971. Photo credit : bangalianaa.com

Operational Factors for Pakistan

Pakistan faced certain challenges in terms of the three operational factors of Time – Space - Force. EP was a long way from WP, and access by air required transits through Sri Lanka. Indian diplomatic pressure on Colombo and its assistance in helping the Lankan regime fight internal insurgency made this increasingly difficult for Pakistan. Until the start of hostilities, merchant ships were the main source of logistics and force build-up. Once martial law was imposed in EP in March 1971 the reputation and consequences for the Pakistani Army steadily worsened. Pro- independence forces became better; India started training and equipping what became the Mukti Bahini literally, Liberation Force. With increasing atrocities on EP civilians, the military government lost all moral authority with only some hardline Islamic fundamentalists and Razakars as collaborators. So, at the military-strategic and operational levels of warfare, the Pakistan Army's Time-Space-Force triad worsened.

Operational Factors for India

Indian strategic planning and execution created a good balance of these three factors. The cabinet had decided the "why" to fight. There was some urgency from the PM on the military getting ready at the earliest, perhaps even before the monsoon set in. General Sam Manekshaw advised strongly against this. If India could wait until November, the advantages were:

- Himalayan passes along the China border would be closed, reducing the probability of a conflict on that front.
- Fighting in the riverine and swampy EP terrain in the monsoons would be avoided.
- Time would be available for detailed planning, arms buildup and logistics development.
- The EP theatre could be shaped by building up the Mukti Bahini.
- Importantly, diplomacy would have time to win over friends. In August 1971, the very important Indo-Soviet Friendship treaty was signed. In December, the Soviet Navy deployed its seven nuclear attack submarines to the Indian Ocean to play a counter-balancing role against the US muscle-flexing.

Because India geographically encircled land borders of EP on three sides, and the fourth was the sea, it was possible to think of the entire Eastern Wing as a strategic salient with no seaward escape route. And, that is how it unfolded, not perfectly, but very adequately from India's viewpoint.

With the limited and strategic defensive intent planned for WP theatre, the issues were different. Opposing forces had less asymmetry; for Yahya and the Pakistan Army this was the main front and they could not risk major setbacks. While India marshaled much greater forces in the East to rapidly defeat the enemy, the Pakistani leadership held back most of its own strength in the West.

The Indian Navy (IN) could dominate not only in the Bay of Bengal but off the Pakistan coast and it did. The Indian Air Force (IAF) had created a massive preponderance in EP, and achieved command of the air very quickly.



Mrs Indira Gandhi meeting the three Chiefs after the War.

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) was quite strong in the West, but the IAF still had an edge.

The Three Keys to Success of the War Plans

I would say there were three key aspects that led to the accomplishment of objectives and quick success:

First, the consonance between the political and military leadership. The Cabinet, led by Mrs Gandhi remained decisive. Among other ministers, Mr Jagjivan Ram and Sardar Swaran Singh have stood out in several subsequent analyses as extremely capable, experienced leaders and yet able to leave much of the planning and execution of their policy to military and diplomatic and administrative professionals.

Second, the troika of the three Service Chiefs eventually worked well together. General SHFJ Manekshaw, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal and Admiral SM Nanda had their differences, but they resolved them. General Manekshaw had differences of opinion with the PM as well, but she not only saw merit in his recommendation of not rushing into a conflict too early, but also gave the Chiefs of Services the freedom to plan the combined military strategy. Differences of opinion are valuable and always a sign that at least one of the two parties involved is doing the thinking and not a case of the Service Chiefs quietly deferring to the political leadership. The 1971 War was, in fact, a good example of a very satisfactory civil-military relationship. In some other context I have called this the very critical aspect of "good" inter-personal friction that enables better decisions to be arrived at. A corollary to this "good friction" was found within the Services themselves, wherein commanders had disagreements between themselves.

Third, for Pakistan defending itself in the West was its primary concern. Even after it realised that it was almost losing the civil war, and would lose EP in case of a conflict with India, it not only did nothing much, it did not even think adequately about the possibility. India's strategy succeeded so impressively in the East because it was well - crafted, and because the enemy's strategy was poorly conceived.

Fighting The Fight

The 1971 war is an excellent example of good leadership at the military-strategic and operational levels of warfare. At the tactical level, where fighting actually takes place,

delivered with courage, disregard to their own lives, personal valour, improvisation and even made up for gaps in higher level leadership. In the 1962 Indo-China War, during the Sri Lankan intervention in 1987-1989 and even during the Kargil conflict in 1999, these trends were seen. In 1971 across all three services, not only commanders-in-chief, but other formation and fleet commanders generally displayed operational and tactical robustness in planning and in aggressive execution. In some accounts that follow in this issue, there are examples that would gladden any reader. As in any human enterprise, there would be some who would fall short and that too did happen.

Salient Features of Land Operations

The selection of Dhaka as the military objective, the Centre of Gravity (COG) had been debated in the run up to the war. Until sometime in October 1971, based on the Army chief's initial planning the intent was to advance into EP from all directions but halt well short of the capital, having defeated major EP formations, achieved command of the air and over the Bay of Bengal. Once halted, the Mukti Bahini, under the guidance of the government-in-exile would continue until liberation was achieved. It was the strong recommendation of Major General Jacob, the Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command that resulted in a change of plans. While this was not the Chief's initial plan, General Manekshaw's sagacity lay in his acceptance of the idea which was thereafter boldly executed.

Eastern Theatre. Fundamentally, while the terrain had its tactical difficulties due to jungles, hills, rivers and marshes, India had geo-strategically surrounded EP on three sides. Accordingly, a simplified recounting would be that:

1. IV Corps would advance and progress attacks from the East along three axes.
2. II Corps would do the same from the West.
3. XXXIII Corps would also advance along three axes from the North-West.
4. 101 Communications Zone would advance Southward from the North.
5. Dhaka was encircled by 11-12 December.
6. The Sylhet heli-borne operations were planned and executed to great effect by 08 December. This was followed by the Tangail paradrop on the evening of 11 December, also a brilliantly staged joint air manoeuvre.
7. The noose closed around Dhaka by the morning of 16 December and surrender seemed the only recourse left to Lieutenant General Niazi.

Land power, air and sea power worked together to neutralise the COG. The role and contribution of the Mukti Bahini was also extremely important. Terms like "grey-zone/ hybrid warfare" are thought of as new types of warfare. They aren't. From the early days of the civil war and with the influx of refugees, the government decided to leverage the desire of the Bangladeshi people and help them in their internal struggle. In this endeavour their own government-in-exile, and Bengali personnel who had deserted or resigned from the Pakistani Armed Forces became the nucleus around which the Mukti Bahini emerged. In the previous issue (July-September) of Medals and Ribbons, the article on "Operation Jackpot" is an example of an extremely effective Special Forces operation undertaken by the Mukti Bahini. Attacks were launched by "swarms" of mainly Bangladeshi commandoes (almost 180) on merchant ships in five EP ports. They sank or severely damaged almost 25 ships (worth about 45,000 tons sunk and 14,000 tons damaged) which resulted in more troops being taken into port protection, logistics being put under pressure and providing early markers of victory that boosted the morale of millions of Bengalis. The role of these irregular forces cannot be over-stated.



Source : KBK Infographics

Western Theatre. Compared to the land-force superiority in the Eastern Theatre (seven Indian divisions plus a few independent brigades and six divisions on the China front, Pakistan had five depleted and distributed divisions and three independent brigades), India had a smaller margin of superiority in the Western Theatre. While the three Corps opposed each other, India's thirteen divisions and six independent brigades faced eleven Pakistani divisions and three independent brigades. Though India was superior in number of tanks, India's objectives were to maintain a strong defensive posture while conducting vigorous local offensives. Territorial gains in the desert sector were far greater than envisaged and surprised the senior commanders. Overall, along the Western Theatre there were several battles

It had deployed two submarines and surface task groups in the Arabian Sea but the real punches were delivered by the newly acquired missile boats in two innovatively conceived, boldly planned and daringly executed attacks.

and engagements, some of which are explained in some detail elsewhere in this issue. India lost some territory and gained more elsewhere. Pakistanis, being stronger at places, fought back well showing tactical acumen. Some analysts have opined that a more aggressive and offensive overall strategy along the Western front would have been beneficial to achieve the larger political aims against Pakistan even in a limited time window. However, such assessments should be made by evaluating both the contexts and situation under which leaders made these decisions.

Salient Features of Air Operations

Eastern Theatre. The IAF tasks in the Eastern Theatre were:

- To establish air superiority over EP skies as early as possible. PAF had never really built up their air power in the East. Even if they wished to, it was not possible to ferry fighters across the Indian Ocean even if landing in Sri Lanka was somehow arranged. The fighters simply didn't have the range. Also, they were heavily outnumbered at almost 400: 25 combat aircraft. Even these were blasted out of the sky in short order thus enabling zero air threat for the Indian Army and Navy in the Bay of Bengal.
- Provide close air support (CAS) to enhance the tempo of the Army thrusts into EP. Reconnaissance flights and offensive air support sorties provided the Army the information and the firepower needed to blunt some of the Pakistan Army defences. Once the PAF ceased to exist, IAF's options to deploy more effort to CAS also obviously improved.
- Enable air-bridging operations with para drops and helicopters. Some of these were planned at the last moment, like the night landing in Sylhet on 07/08 December across the Meghna river.
- Casevac, i.e. casualty evacuation of Indian wounded troops and Mukti Bahini combatants.

Western Theatre. Expectedly, the margin of superiority in the West for the IAF was not significant. The 1971 Indo-Pak War was declared as a result of the pre-emptive air attacks by PAF on several Western sector IAF bases. This was an expected move, and forecast accurately based on the phases of the moon and the increasingly tenuous strategic predicament of Pakistan. These attacks did little damage, but the IAF retaliated the next day. Through 04-17 December, it launched 4000 sorties and lost 80 aircraft but scored well and the PAF as well as Pakistan Army had a tough time with the flyboys (in Khaki, not blue those days!) In an interesting account by Lieutenant Arun Prakash, IN (who retired as Admiral and the Chief of the Naval Staff) in this issue, readers will get a sense of the motivation, professionalism and daring of IAF pilots.

Go Navy! Naval Operations Breathe Fire in the West and Asphyxiate in the East

Eastern Theatre. In the Bay of Bengal, the IN had appreciated a reduced threat from the Pakistan Navy (PN) due to the distance from Karachi. The guess was that they would deploy at least one submarine-which they did; PNS Ghazi was lurking outside Visakhapatnam (Vizag) port. According to official histories, Ghazi possibly sank due to an internal explosion of a mine or torpedo. INS Rajput was also looking for her with sonar and did attack a contact with depth charges where she sank. INS Vikrant, the aircraft carrier, was planned for deployment and strikes on coastal targets of EP such that she could operate under lesser threat and with more effectiveness than were she to be deployed off the WP Coast. As it were, the aim set by the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Eastern Naval Command was "To destroy enemy maritime forces deployed in support of his military operations and to deny all sustenance from reaching the enemy. As a corollary, any movements out of EP should be prevented." Accordingly, four tasks were set and carried out from seaward:

- Attacks from sea on Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Chalna, Khulna and Mongla.
- Destruction of shipping (much of it achieved on 15 August itself!)
- Offensive actions on opportunity targets.
- Diversionary or actual amphibious landings. (The landings at Cox's Bazar on 14 December were badly planned and executed, and the official history by the Navy has termed it a "fiasco." This happens and benefits come when we can analyse failures with professional honesty.)

Western Theatre. Considering that there was a need to strike at Pakistani focal points at and off Karachi, the IN prepared well for its missions. It remained on the offensive and kept the PN on the defensive. It had deployed two submarines and surface task groups in the Arabian Sea but the real punches were delivered by the newly acquired missile boats in two innovatively conceived, boldly planned and daringly executed attacks. (An interesting account of these is in a separate article.) However, the official history also points out that the Western Naval Command C-in-C hesitated about this plan due to the possibility of things going wrong. Admiral Nanda conveyed to him that in that case he would be relieved and someone else would

be appointed who could deliver what was required. These differences can be normal occurrences in conflict planning and execution and point to the robustness of command relationships with the benefits that operational and tactical aggressiveness bring to increasing chances of victory.

The IN lost a frigate, INS Khukri to torpedoes fired by PNS Hangor, an enemy submarine, off Diu on the coast of Gujarat during the night of 09 December 1971. Several of the crew went down with the ship. Among them was Captain MN Mulla who chose to go down because he knew many of his men were trapped inside and he could not leave them. What may have happened in his mind in those short minutes can only be guessed, but a letter that Commander Allan Rodrigues wrote decades later to his daughter would not only give us an understanding of the ways of "Our Fathers" but think more carefully about the context of combat, the challenges of anti-submarine warfare and the effectiveness of submarines. This letter is also in this issue and could be linked to the unique facet of naval life and leadership explained and why it is said of a Commanding Officer that "he is the captain, he is the ship." (Please see this writer's article in the July-September 2021 issue of Medals and Ribbons, page 28).

Concluding Thoughts

Indeed, the 1971 war was a righteous war from India's perspective in which the political and military leadership came together with purpose, with clear national policy and plans and with a great grasp of the international environment that needed to be leveraged, ignored or countered as required. In that sense, it was statecraft at a very high level. In short, conflict planning was well- thought.

It was also well-fought. This issue gives you an idea of the higher leadership skills of General Manekshaw and the other Chiefs in articles that follow, and of the way they ensured a reasonable level of jointness. When we look at battles and operations in greater detail, we see a lot of examples of boldness, quick decisions, valour and daring at the operational and tactical levels of leadership. Of course, as always happens in the complex environment in which war is waged some leaders fell short. Commanders, like all human beings are fallible.

There were issues of lack of joint planning as well as operational and tactical training that ought to have been resolved in time through inter-service cooperation. Fifty years later, we are still ploughing different furrows in some matters of jointness, but we seem to be finally at the threshold of thinking through joint commands and bringing multi-dimensional synergies into warfighting. These lessons were somewhat more difficult to learn from the 1971 War because we won, and we won resoundingly. Success has a blinding effect and lessons get lost in the shadows of that very success.

The war ended as a clear victory for humanity and a triumph for India. In fact, after a full-blown, rapid campaign of 13-14 days, about 75 million people in Bangladesh, mainly Muslims, were liberated from tyranny by the Armed Forces of a secular, but predominantly Hindu country and enabled to construct their own democracy. A union of two incompatible cultures, peoples and languages of the two Pakistans was sustained only for two dozen years and in which the final few months were of unspeakable cruelty on the Bangladeshis by West Pakistanis and their Razakar supporters in EP. A nation and peoples were liberated by the Indian Armed Forces acting in close and sustained conjunction with the fighters for liberation within Bangladesh. Meanwhile, India declared a unilateral ceasefire in the West, which a defeated and despondent General Yahya Khan accepted in a great hurry on 17 December! The unlimited objective of regime change in the East had been achieved while the overall situation remained in India's favour in the West as well. To boot, nearly 93,000 troops and government officials had surrendered to Indian commanders in the East. It was, ultimately, a just war that was well-thought and well-fought.

The last word on this conflict could perhaps be given to a General from the losing side. Major General Shaukat Riza had this to say:

"In 1971, while neck deep in the quagmire of civil war, the Army was hurled against an enemy better equipped, better organized, better trained and in larger numbers. And to crown everything, we had no national objective except a cease-fire."

It was, ultimately, a just war that was well-thought and well-fought.



Rear Admiral Sudarshan Y Shrikhande, *AVSM (Retd), commissioned in July 1980 has commanded IN ships Nishank, Kora and Khukri. He is a post- graduate (with distinction) of the Soviet Naval War College (1988 in ASW Weapon and Sonar Engg), DSSC Wellington (Scudder Medal), Naval War College and of the US NWC with highest distinction (2003) winning the Levy, Bateman and Forrestal Prizes. As a Flag officer he headed Naval Intelligence and also served as Chief of Staff in HQ Integrated Defence Staff and HQ Strategic Forces Command. Post retirement, he is involved in teaching strategy formulation, operational art, force structuring, RMA, China, the Indo-Pacific, the Peloponnesian War, leadership and ethics in several military as well as civilian institutions. He is associated with the Vivekananda International and Observer Research Foundations as well as FINS. He is an adjunct professor at the Takshashila Institution and Naval War College as also the Editor-in-chief of the Indian Naval Despatch.*



Nothing succeeds like success
Courtesy: The Manekshaw family

FACING PAGE:
Sam's favourite picture of himself
Courtesy: Authors

MOMENTOUS TIMES WITH MANEKSHAW

An Aide Recalls

Brigadier Behram Panthaki, who was his ADC, shares interesting anecdotes of the Field Marshal.

In early 1966, the Government sought the opinion of General JN Chaudhuri, the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS), regarding his successor. General Chaudhuri indicated that there would be no war for the next two years and suggested that Lieutenant General Kumaramangalam be made the next Chief and Lieutenant General SHFJ Manekshaw be given a two-year extension. The government agreed, and thus in April 1969 Sam Manekshaw was appointed COAS, or else Lieutenant General Manekshaw, having completed four years as Army Commander, would have retired in December 1967, as per the terms of engagement.

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was a man of many qualities. He was well known for his honesty, uprightness, great sense of humour, for calling a spade a spade, perhaps for keeping politicians guessing and the bureaucrats on their toes (no mean feat). But above all, he was known for his military acumen and moral courage that caused him to speak up for what was right and expedient. For Sam, nationalism reigned supreme and the welfare and respect of the troops he commanded was non-negotiable.

Soon after Sam became Chief, the appointment of Military Secretary (MS) fell vacant. He selected Major General BN 'Jimmy' Sarkar (Armoured Corps) but Defence Minister Swaran Singh had his own candidate in mind. He

turned down Sam's recommendation, asking him to cast the net wider and submit three names to the Ministry. Sam was quick to smell a rat. He submitted the names of three outstanding Major Generals: Mahdi Hasnain from Infantry, Savak Antia from the Corps of Signals, and 'Jimmy' Sarkar from the Armoured Corps, thereby thwarting the parochial designs of the Defence Minister. The Ministry acquiesced and 'Jimmy' was appointed MS.

As Chief, his first priority was to ensure that the Indian Army was a formidable force with cutting-edge weapons and technology in its arsenal. Additional armoured brigades were raised to meet operational requirements. The production of the indigenous Vijayanta tank was speeded up. Shortages of military hardware such as trawl tanks, bridge-laying tanks and armoured recovery vehicles were made good through imports. To match the mobility of armour, selected infantry battalions were mechanised. Artillery regiments were equipped with long-range guns and their mobility enhanced. Keenly aware of financial constraints, modernisation was balanced with cost-effectiveness. Training for armoured and mechanised regiments on 'tank simulators', that had been demonstrated by the Soviets during his visit to the USSR, was introduced in the Indian Army, thereby reducing the wear and tear on expensive equipment.

Once when he was scheduled to visit Ambala, the weatherman forecast cyclonic weather on the day of his visit and it was suggested that he cancel the tour. This to him was unacceptable, 'The COAS does not predicate his travels on the weather. What message will this convey to the men; that a little rain could scare away their Chief?' To him, last minute cancellations smacked of indifference to the time and labour



(Upper left) Manekshaw discussing plans at Tezpur. (Lower left) Gen Niazi signs the Instrument of Surrender on 16 December 1971. (Right) President VV Giri confers the Field Marshal rank.

invested by soldiers to ensure that the spit and polish of the establishment was up to snuff.

As Chief, Sam fought many battles with the establishment to retain special allowances and perks of army personnel. He successfully stymied a move by the Defence Ministry to reduce the two-month leave entitlement by putting forth a counter proposal to increase it because of long and frequent deployments.

In Pakistan, the elections which were initially scheduled for October 1970 were postponed by two months because of the severe monsoon flooding in East Pakistan in August. General Manekshaw, a strategist with foresight and military insight anticipated post-election political upheaval in our neighbourhood. During the weekly Principal Staff Officers meetings he continued to give his assessment of the likely fall out if the results were unfavourable to those in power. The Chief tasked the Military Operations Directorate to make a presentation during the Army Commanders' Conference and give out the Army HQ's appraisal of the anticipated geopolitical situation likely to prevail. He directed that formation commanders must keep a close watch on the situation and take measures to be prepared should the Indian Army be called out to intervene.

1971 brought with it ominous forebodings of war on the Indian subcontinent. The Awami League, an East Pakistan political party, won a majority of seats in Pakistan's federal elections, marginalising Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party of West Pakistan. This made Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the leader of the Awami League and a Bengali Muslim, the top contender for the post of Prime Minister of Pakistan. Even though he won a clear majority, the Sheikh was not invited to form the government. This sparked a civil disobedience movement in East Pakistan, and President and Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Yahya Khan, ordered army action. On March 25, 1971 the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight, unleashing genocide on the people of East Pakistan and creating an unprecedented and desperate situation which continued to take a turn for the worse. In the months that followed, millions of refugees poured into India till the economic, financial and logistical burden on the border states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura became non-sustainable.

In the third week of April, on her return from Kolkata, after being briefed by Chief Ministers of Border States, Mrs. Indira Gandhi drove straight to the Operations Room of Army Headquarters and after giving her assessment of the

on that day he had successfully walked the fine line 'between becoming a Field Marshal and being dismissed!'

situation, turned to the Army Chief and said, "What can you do, Chief?" "Nothing", he replied in his inimitable cryptic manner. His army was not ready and would need time to mount an offensive. This response coming from no less a person than the Army Chief surprised Mrs. Gandhi, and shocked key ministers and senior bureaucrats. No one had ever dared to speak to her in this manner.

A week later, on 28 April, she held another Cabinet meeting at Parliament House to which the Army Chief was also invited. I had accompanied him but had to sit in the waiting room. When we were returning to Army HQ, he said to me in the car, "Behroze (yes, he always called me Behroze), you almost lost your job just now, and so did I". At the meeting, the PM and her Cabinet Ministers put pressure on him to march into East Pakistan forthwith but he stood his ground. The knee-jerk reaction of the government and the proposal emanating from the Cabinet was completely flawed. Spelling out facts that were germane to any military planning, he queried the impulse to jump the gun. The timing was not right. He needed time to mobilise formations to their operational locations and ensure adequate and uninterrupted logistical support. Logistically, any operation in summer spelt disaster with the entire delta region of West Bengal turning into a vast swamp with the monsoon rains. This would confine the movement of armoured vehicles to the roads. Air support would be restricted because of poor visibility. Any entry into East Pakistan would be suicidal until the rivers had ebbed and the snow had blocked any chance of the Chinese opening up a third front along the Northern border. A very grim Prime Minister dismissed the Cabinet but asked Sam to stay back. Sensing her anger, he asked, *"… would you like me to send in my resignation on grounds of health, mental or physical?"* "Sit down, Sam. Is everything you told me true?" *"Yes, it is my job to tell you the truth"*. If war was the option of last resort, it would be on his call. *"It is my job to fight and it is my job to win."* He assured the Prime Minister that East Pakistan would capitulate within a month, but only if he was given a free hand, if the timing was of his choice, and if he had only one political master to report to, the Prime Minister. She agreed to his terms of engagement. Narrating this, while delivering a lecture at the DSSC on November 11, 1998 on 'Leadership and Discipline', he said that on that day he had successfully walked the fine line 'between becoming a Field Marshal and being dismissed!'

With that the planning of the most brilliant campaign in military history began. Preparation and coordination with departments of government and ministries commenced. The Army Chief and representatives of key ministries met weekly to track progress. For the first month the civil administration continued to drag its feet which left Sam with no option but to convey his frustration to Mrs Indira Gandhi; he was losing valuable time. The next meeting was held in the Operations Room of Army Headquarters. Sam summed up the situation: progress had been glacial. The Finance Ministry was yet to approve expenditures and release funds to line Ministries. The army was awaiting approval from the Defence Ministry to make up deficiencies. The railways had reneged on all deadlines; work on extending the railheads up to the borders had not commenced nor had rolling stock been released, holding up the movement of troops and materials. A furious Prime Minister turned on her ministers. Each of them was made to commit to a deadline and with that the preparations for war commenced in earnest.

At the same time, Sam directed Army HQ that all documents, correspondence pertaining to the war, however inconsequential they might seem, should not be discarded or destroyed. He wanted to ensure that records were maintained for posterity.

War broke out on 4 December when the Pakistan Air Force strafed Indian airfields along the Western border and was over by 16 December with a resounding victory after the capture of Dhaka, capital of erstwhile East Pakistan. At 4.30 pm on December 16, at Dhaka's Ramna Race Course, Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi signed the Instrument of Surrender and handed over his pistol, lanyard and badges of rank to Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora, GOC-in-C Eastern Command, thereby placing Pakistan's Eastern Army under the command of the Indian Army and bringing the war to an end with the unconditional surrender of 93,000 officers and men.

Military analysts are unanimous in their view that had India attacked East Pakistan in April 1971 without the essential logistics build-up the outcome would have been an unmitigated disaster for the Indian Army and the Nation.

With India's decisive victory, General Manekshaw became a cause célèbre. In his office, a framed copy of the Instrument of Surrender was displayed with pride. The document had been drafted by him, and cleared by Shri KB Lal, the Defence Secretary and by Shri PN Haksar, the Secretary to the Prime Minister. Sam dictated the contents on phone to Headquarters Eastern Command and told them to get four originals: one each for the records at Army Headquarters and Eastern Command, one for General Niazi and one for his office. This was his treasured memento.

By March 1972 the Indian Army had handed over the administration of Bangladesh to civil authorities and was back in its barracks. Sam had reached the age of superannuation and was due to retire on April 3, 1972. He wrote to the Prime Minister to relieve him of his duties, but she was not willing to let him go without settling matters relating to territories captured during the war and the settlement of the issue of 93,000 POWs. On April 1, 1972, through a presidential decree Sam was asked to continue in office. This was a second extension of service received during his career.

In the middle of 1972, a Selection Board for three Lieutenant Generals to be appointed as Army Commanders was held. Of three eligible officers, Army HQ recommended two. When the Defence Ministry turned down the promotion of those two Lieutenant Generals, Sam wrote to Mrs Indira Gandhi. Regarding the first, '… he is an honest man who speaks his mind fearlessly. I admit he could be more tactful, but who am I to speak about tact? He is … dignified, straight, truthful and professionally good. I therefore feel that he should make the grade.' Defending the second, who had been blamed for failures during the operations of 1962 and 1971, he said, '… 1962 was a bad year for everyone, even if I had been in [his] place, I couldn't have produced better results. In 1971 [he] could have done better …. My only grouse against [him] was that he should have taken the blame for everything that happened in his Corps instead of blaming his Divisional and Brigade Commanders. It is not a good trait in an officer to pass the responsibility for failure on to his subordinates, and hog the praise …. You must trust my judgement Prime Minister: … I am sure you will not take a decision contrary to my advice without first discussing the matter with me again. You and I hold views which are generally in conformity, it would be a great pity if on this subject we should find ourselves opposed. Naturally, I shall accept your decision loyally, but I would again urge that you accept my recommendation.' In both instances he did prevail.

The General officer who was not recommended by Army HQ had been endorsed by the Ministry of Defence for promotion. Sam wrote to Indira Gandhi questioning the Minister's decision, 'As I told you this morning, I think the Defence Minister's views could be discounted as he neither has knowledge, nor objectivity, with regard to these promotions … You and I know all about [the officer]: though professionally capable, morally he is not fit to be an officer, leave alone an Army Commander … not only did he steal [and] keep women, but he has lied … If he were to be made an Army Commander the whole Army would feel let down … I think you will agree with me that he can never be made an Army Commander.' The Prime Minister agreed.

On 01 January 1973, Sam wrote a personal and confidential letter to the Prime Minister. It read, inter alia, "Most of the immediate problems, as a consequence of the last conflict, appear to have been resolved. I feel, therefore, that the time has now come for me to relinquish my office and let a younger man take over. If you are agreeable, perhaps I can hand over my assignment on the 15th of this month after bidding my officers and men farewell at the Army Day Parade. It would also be a fit occasion for my successor to take over from me on Army Day. Would you please request the President to see his way to release me from office?"

The very next day the Prime Minister replied giving her consent to the Field Marshal's request. On 15 January, 1973 after bidding farewell to his officers and men at the Army Day Parade, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw drove to Army Headquarters, handed over the charge to General GG Bewoor bringing the curtain down on a glorious era of military history.

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was born a Parsi and for the community he will always remain 'apro Sam' (our Sam), for the Gorkhas and for the Indian Army he was their very own Sam Bahadur, the Sikhs claim him as one of their own and the Tamilians are happy that he had made the Nilgiris his home. The Royal Scots will cherish his achievements while the burly Sikhs of 4/12 FFR (now Pakistan Army's 6 FFR) will always remember their 'Jangi Lat' with pride as will all PIFFERS on both sides of the border. He belonged to all men and officers of the Indian Army, in fact to the Armed Forces. Above all, he belonged to all Indians. Even today he is a super-sized hero that each one of us can claim a bit of.



Brigadier Ervad Behram Panthaki *(Retd) has the distinct honour of being a fully qualified, ordained and practicing priest of the Zoroastrian (Parsi) Faith and a career soldier having served in the Indian Army for over 30 years. Besides command of 2/8 Gorkha Rifles, he has held important staff and instructional appointments. He has seen active service on the Indo-China and Indo-Pakistan borders, and fought insurgency in Nagaland, Mizoram and in the Punjab. He has served as ADC (Aide-de-Camp) to Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, for over six years. After taking early retirement, Behram has been serving the Zoroastrian community of Washington Metropolitan Area and is also the Zoroastrian faith leader of the Washington Chapter of the Inter Faith Conference. Behram has co-authored with his wife, Zenobia, a coffee table pictorial book titled Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, The Man and His Times. The entire royalty from the book is donated to the War Wounded Foundation and War Widows Association of India.*

BATTLE ACCOUNTS

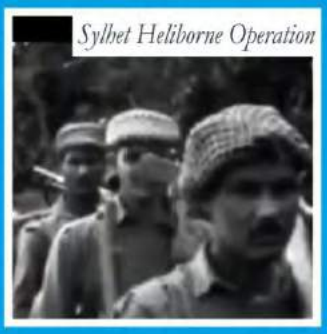
Eastern Theatre



Battle of Garibpur



Feni to Chittagong



Sylhet Heliborne Operation



Airborne Assault into Tangail



Battle of Bogra



Dhaka in his Sights



Battle of Hilli



Jangis

"50 YEARS AFTER THE 1971 WAR"

Special Commemorative Issue



Jubilant officers and men atop a captured Pakistani Chaffee tank at Garibpur.

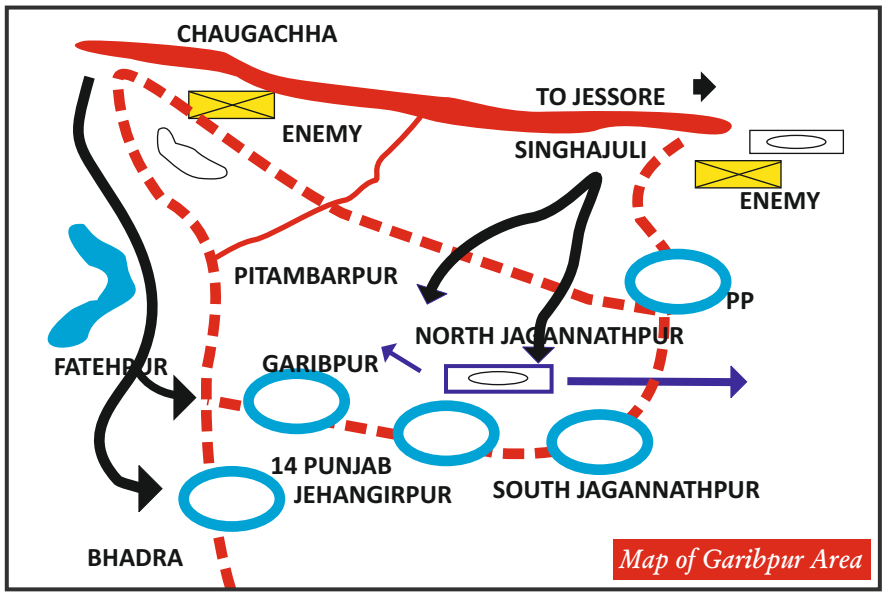
NABHA AKAL HOLDS ON AT GARIBPUR

14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL) came under heavy shelling and air attacks, but resiliently staved off a Pakistani Brigade counter attack in one of the earliest border actions of the conflict.

Prevailing Scenario

The 'Lightning Campaign' to liberate Bangladesh during the Indo-Pak War 1971 was one of the finest moments in Indian history. The 'Battle of Garibpur' fought on 21-22 November 1971 before the Indo-Pak War was officially declared on 03 December 1971, was a key battle in East Pakistan where a single infantry battalion 14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL) supported by a squadron of armour successfully fought a Pakistani brigade.

The situation on the Indo-Pak border was worsening due to genocide by the Pakistan army in 1971. In view of the military actions by the Mukti Bahini, Pakistani forays and provocations inside Indian territory increased, leading to Indian losses. 14 PUNJAB was concentrated near the International Border, where it was tasked to successfully dominate the border and 'No man's land' across the Kabadak River. It also had to neutralize an enemy Border Out Post, Dhopakhali, manned by Pakistani regular troops and border police. By end November 1971, the enemy actions had reached a level where it became necessary to protect Indian interests by occupying selected enclaves in East Pakistan.



Map of Garibpur Area

14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) RK Singh was initially tasked to occupy a battalion defended area in Fatehpur, located six kms inside East Pakistan, which was dominated by enemy patrols. The task was later revised 'to secure the area of Garibpur by first light 21 November 1971'.

Importance of Garibpur

Located opposite the Bayra salient, the hamlet of Garibpur, about six kms inside East Pakistan, was an important crossroad astride the highway from India to Jessore via Chaugacha. Jessore was to be secured by 9 Infantry Division in their war plans and one of its axis of advance was the Chaugacha – Jessore highway. A battalion of Pakistani 107 Infantry Brigade was located at Chaugacha, while the remainder brigade and 9 Infantry Division was in Jessore. Since the Garibpur position would outflank the Pakistani battalion at Chaugacha, there was likely to be a strong enemy reaction. This factor had necessitated the grouping of tanks with 14 PUNJAB, a fact not known to the enemy.

Reconnaissance

As the enemy had a secured firm base of Singajhuli available for launching its attack, enemy activity had to be kept under watch. The enemy had the capability to build up for an attack at night and launch its armour supported by infantry from the North and North East. Morning 20 November 1971 - a strong patrol was sent across the border to reconnoitre a suitable area ahead of Fatehpur. Major AP Vishwanathan, OC Alpha Company led this patrol which comprised elements of rifle companies to ensure that all the companies would have guidance to move into position. The move of the unit was supposed to be a surprise, but following a skirmish with an enemy patrol, the Pakistanis were alerted of the impending attack.

Advance to Garibpur

14 PUNJAB along with 'Charlie' Squadron 45 Cavalry equipped with 14 PT-76 tanks crossed the international border formed by the Kabadak River near Bayra and reached the Garibpur position by last light on 20 November 1971. There was just enough time for Lieutenant Colonel RK Singh to issue orders on the radio to his Company Commanders and the Squadron Commander, 'Charlie' Squadron 45 Cavalry before the early winter night set in.

Deployment and Preparation of Defences

Companies were allocated their area of deployment. Major NS Narang, 'Charlie' Squadron Commander, 45 Cavalry, was ordered to deploy his tanks in conjunction with two recoilless (RCL) guns to cover the enemy armour advance from the direction of road Jessore – Chaugacha and the East between Garibpur – South Jagannathpur.

Delta Company under Captain Balbir Singh, with one section Medium Machine Guns (MMGs) and a recoilless gun occupied a company defended locality in South Jagannathpur to cover the tank approach with elements of armour. Charlie Company under Major NJS Bains, with a section of MMGs occupied a company defended locality further North at Track Junction near Pitambarpur, where the two tracks converged from Chaugacha.

Alpha and Bravo Companies under Majors Vishwanathan and KM Machiah occupied the gap between Charlie and Delta Companies. Battalion Headquarters was located near Garibpur. By 3 am on 21st November, the battalion was in position and the men were feverishly at work to get the defences ready by daylight.

The Protective Patrol Reports

A patrol with Captain GS Gill, the Commando Platoon Commander and the artillery observer Captain Chaturvedi from 6 Field Regiment had moved North towards Singhajhuli – North Jagannnathpur to forewarn about the enemy movement on road axis Jessore – Chaugacha. In the cold and foggy early hours of 21 November, Captain Gill heard the unmistakable sounds of enemy tanks moving south from the Chaugacha – Jessore road. The fog and poor visibility allowed the patrol to remain close to the enemy columns and report on them accurately. Captain Chaturvedi, provided with a fine opportunity, brought down accurate artillery fire on the closely massed Pakistani columns. In the poor visibility

and the noise of tanks and own artillery fire, the patrol was nearly encircled, but resolutely broke away. Captain Chaturvedi was wounded and was bravely carried by Captain Gill and others till they finally made their way back to the Company.

Pakistani Infantry and Armour Attacks

As visualized, the Garibpur position outflanked the Pakistani battalion at Chaugacha and there was a violent response by the Pakistani 107 Infantry Brigade at first light on 21 November. It became known later through the prisoners taken that Pakistan's 6 Punjab, elements of 21 Punjab, 22 Frontier Force and 3 Independent Armoured Squadron of Chaffee tanks made up the attacking force. Around 5 am, Charlie Company reported enemy activity opposite their defences at Pitambarpur. It became apparent that while an infantry column was making for Pitambarpur, simultaneously a tank based force was approaching D Company at South Jagannathpur. At 5.30 am, Captain GS Gill reported on radio from the Protective Patrol that he could see enemy armour and infantry lining up for assault in the Forming Up Place (FUP). All companies were warned to be ready for the impending enemy attack.
Enemy artillery guns opened up and started pounding our defences to support their assaulting armour and infantry. As dawn broke out on 21st November, the enemy launched a brigade size attack supported by a squadron of armour equipped with M24 Chaffee tanks. Possessing numerical superiority, the Pakistani troops were in a position to decimate the Indian intrusion. But the Punjab Battalion, known for its long history of valour rose to the occasion splendidly and thwarted the attack, ably supported by the armoured squadron, 45 Cavalry and intimate fire support of own artillery.

An Intense Infantry Encounter

At 6.15 am, 6 Punjab of Pakistan Army ferociously charged the C Company location near Pitambarpur through Chaugacha built up area. The enemy encircled the Charlie Company location



Brig JS Gharaya, KC, VSM, the brigade commander, Lt Col RK Singh, CO 14 PUNJAB, Lt Col RN Dutt, CO 6 Field Regt and other officers in front of a Pakistani tank



Mortar platoon of Nabha Akal in action during the battle.

and a fierce exchange of fire took place. During the pitch dark night, the enemy had closed near enough to indulge in a hand to hand fight.

When the enemy was seen making an outflanking move to surround the company from South, Lieutenant Colonel RK Singh now ordered the company to move South to Jehangirpur, for which the Pakistanis would head to take the battalion from the rear. Major NJS Bains, the Company Commander marshalled his company with great skill and executing a well-organized move almost in the face of the enemy, occupied a new position South of the built up area in the forest near Jehangirpur.

During the enemy's outflanking move, when the enemy had closed in within range, they were effectively engaged at the opportune moment. Subedar Malkiat Singh, the Platoon Commander enthused his men by moving under the enemy's small arms and artillery shelling at the cost of his life. While hurling a grenade on the charging enemy, he was grievously wounded but continued to fire till he emptied his two light machine gun magazines. He displayed conspicuous gallantry and indomitable courage in the face of the enemy, for which he was posthumously awarded a well-deserved Mahavir Chakra.

When the enemy was very close to own defences, Major Bains requested for Defensive Fire (SOS) fire on the enemy at the FUP getting ready for their third attack. Major Kailash Nath, the Battery Commander ensured an accurate barrage to break up the enemy's momentum of attack. The enemy fled in confusion suffering heavy casualties.

The Main Frontal Attack

The main attack, however, came frontally on Delta, Bravo and Alpha Companies. The infantry – tank attack first came on Delta Company location at South Jagannathpur around 6 am. The Pakistani thrust lines having become apparent, thanks to the good work of the patrols operating ahead of the defences, readjustments to

muster the RCL guns and the PT-76 tanks at the required places had been carried out.

The enemy attacked confidently and two of the enemy tanks were destroyed by own armour. During the tank duel, a charging enemy tank sneaked through the fog close to the D Company locality, within 25 metres of the positions. The enemy's artillery and tank fire had forced the RCL gun crew back, but Havildar Lekh Raj, the RCL gun detachment commander, reacted swiftly. He single handed, loaded the RCL gun himself and fired at the charging tank. In no time, the tank was ablaze. This NCO was awarded Vir Chakra for his outstanding courage.

In another engagement, one of our tanks which had by then moved to cover the developing threat, hit another Chaffee which turned out to be the enemy troop leader's tank. The troop leader attempting to clamber out was shot by Captain GS Gill. In the close fighting that ensued when the other Chaffees closed in, the Squadron Commander, Major DS Narang was hit and killed while directing his tanks standing up in the tank cupola. In the neighbouring troop, Lieutenant Tejinder Singh, the troop leader, was similarly hit and badly wounded.

Under the cover of fog, an enemy tank troop firing their MMGs and guns closed up to Delta and Alpha Company locations but own troops steadfastly stuck to their defences giving a determined fight. On both sides, a matching and relentless intensive battle of armour and infantry raged for over two hours. During this ferocious fight, both sides suffered heavy casualties.

By this time, Pakistani 6 Punjab, which had been moving south, closed in through the woods on Garibpur and attacked the Battalion Headquarters area from the West. Under Captain (later Brigadier) MPS Bajwa, the Adjutant, the Battalion Headquarters and Signal Platoon personnel in depth, engaged the enemy effectively. This assault was broken up by the use of very close artillery support DF (SOS) competently handled by the Battery Commander, Major Kailash Nath.

By about 8.30 am the enemy momentum of assault petered out and it was clear that NABHA AKAL with its affiliated units had carried the day. The winter sun, now up through the rising fog, revealed a large number of enemy casualties, which included 10 of enemy's tanks destroyed and 3 abandoned in good condition. The killing ground was strewn with the debris of an assault, with the dead and weapons lying where they had fallen.



CO and 2iC atop a Pakistani tank with other officers and men after the battle.



Lt Col RK Singh, CO passing orders on radio.



D Company troops in position, ready to defend

The Air Battle Over Bayra

Around 9.25 am on 22 November 1971, four enemy Sabre aircraft suddenly appeared and started strafing the battalion defences. One of our PT-76 tanks tried to engage the enemy aircraft flying low with its machine gun. This tank was rocketed by all the aircraft and destroyed, while the crew was seriously injured. The second time, at about 2 pm the same day, enemy's three aircraft roared in freely when Major Kailash Nath, the Battery Commander, got a smoke shot fired on the enemy position at Singhajhuli. This deception paid good dividends as all the enemy aircraft diverted their attack on their own troops at Singhajhuli.

Again at about 2.45 pm the same day, three more Pakistani aircraft roared in and were having a free run, when suddenly, four Indian Gnat aircrafts from No 22 Squadron based in Kalaikunda appeared in the sky. In the first aerial combat between the two sides since the 1965 War, all three enemy aircraft were shot down in the ensuing dog-fight. Two of the Pakistani pilots Flying Officers Khalil Ahmed and Parvez Mehdi Qureshi ejected safely but were captured by the Indian Army and treated as Prisoners of War (PWs). The troops on the ground had an uninterrupted view of this air battle, which gave the Battalion a tremendous fillip. Once more the diminutive Indian Gnats flown by the Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots had established its mastery over the Sabre jets. Resultantly, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) stopped sending fighter-bombers to support own troops.

Strategic and Operational Effects

The Battle of Garibpur had many national and international repercussions and led to interesting results on both sides. General Yahya Khan declared a National Emergency in Pakistan and complained to the UN Secretary General, U Thant about India violating the UN Charter. On the Indian side, Mrs Indira Gandhi announced India's determination to match the Pakistani response.

This intense battle of a battalion group defeating a brigade attack supported by armour and

PAF will go down in the annals of warfare as a fiercely fought victory. At the tactical level, the battle forced the Pakistanis to vacate Chaugacha. Later when the war was fully joined in early December, own 9 Infantry Division was able to close up almost halfway upto Jessore, which was its initial objective.

The Battle of Garibpur was a decisive victory, where NABHA AKAL and attached troops fought magnificently. It not only blunted a brigade sized attack supported by enemy armour and PAF, but in the process two Pakistani infantry battalions (6 PUNJAB and 22 FF) and 3 Independent Squadron were badly mauled. After the War, Pakistan ordered a Commission under Chief Justice Hamoodur Rahman on the defeat of the Pakistani Army during the 1971 Conflict. An extract of the report mentioned that Brig Mohammad Hayat, former Commander 107 Brigade, be tried by court martial for not formulating a sound plan for the defence of the Jessore fortress and failing to properly plan and command the brigade counter-attack at Garibpur.

Casualties

Own losses including the affiliated units were 28 killed and 42 wounded, while four PT-76 tanks were destroyed. On the enemy side, 13 Chaffee tanks were neutralized which included three captured in running condition. One of these captured Pakistani Chaffee tanks occupies a place of pride in the Punjab Regimental Centre at Ramgarh Cantonment, Jharkhand today. Practically the whole of the enemy's squadron was annihilated. Three enemy aircraft were lost in the air battle while 300 soldiers, including three officers were killed and wounded. Six enemy Prisoners of War apprehended by 14 PUNJAB confirmed the identity of the Pakistani units involved in the battle. A large quantity of arms, ammunition and equipment were captured which included Chinese made automatic weapons and mines.

Honours and Awards

The Battle of Garibpur brought a total of 40 well-deserved gallantry awards to the battalion, its affiliated troops and the IAF. Lieutenant Colonel RK Singh, Major DS Narang (posthumously) and Subedar Malkiat Singh (posthumously) were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. In addition, seven Vir Chakras and three Sena Medals were also awarded.

A Memorable Visit to Bangladesh

During Vijay Diwas 2013, Brigadier RK Singh was part of an Indian delegation consisting of 1971 War veterans which visited Bangladesh, where he got an opportunity to visit the battlefields at Garibpur after 42 years! The people of Garibpur and surrounding areas are ever grateful for the contribution and sacrifice of the Indian soldiers. A small memorial with an epitaph commemorating the Battle of Garibpur is located astride the road leading to Garibpur, a tiny and predominantly agricultural hamlet. A high school has been constructed at Garibpur village, and another monument erected near a mango tree in an open patch in the school premises to commemorate the martyrs – both Mukti Bahini and Indian soldiers of the Liberation War. Some villagers say that a few graves of Indian martyrs are located there and the farmers still recover tank shells and odd bullet empties from their fields – a stark reminder of the fierce tank and infantry battle between the Indian and Pakistan armies during November 1971.

Some Bangladesh officers attending the Staff College Course at Wellington few years ago, informed me that the Battle of Garibpur is enacted by their battalions as part of an exercise organized for troops to draw many useful lessons. They requested for some material and original photographs of the Garibpur battle. There is a war museum at Jessore Cantonment which contains artifacts, photographs and other items from the 'Liberation War'.

During the visit of the Bangladesh PM, Sheikh Hasina to India in April 2017, Subedar Malkiat Singh, MVC (Posthumous) was one of the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War, whose family was honoured by the PMs of both the countries. The Commanding Officer and Subedar Major of the unit were invited for the ceremony in New Delhi on 08 April 2017.

Conclusion

The Battle of Garibpur was a curtain raiser for the Bangladesh War in which the troops of 14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL) Battalion Group exhibited phenomenal courage, grit and determination. The other supporting units like 'C' Squadron 45 Cavalry, the Engineers and Artillery and the IAF too played a crucial role. It was the first main battle of the 1971 War, wherein a significant military victory blunted the enemy's counter-attack capability. The extensive damage and heavy losses suffered in the first encounter had a major impact on the Pakistan Army's ensuing operations and adversely affected their morale.



Col Vijay Yeshvant Gidh, *VSM (Retd) was commissioned in 13 PUNJAB (JIND) in June 1976. He commanded 14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL) in J&K, Manipur and Nagaland. He has also served as an Instructor in NSG Training Centre, Manesar and as a Brigade Major in Sikkim. He did a tenure in UN Peacekeeping Mission in Angola and has also been the Commandant, The Punjab Regimental Centre. His son Col Varun Vijay Gidh, SM is presently commanding 14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL).*



Brothers in Arms, Ready for Battle. Photo credit rediff.com

THE FIERCELY FOUGHT BATTLES OF HILLI AND BOGRA

There were several intense battles fought during the Indo Pak war, but the Battles of Hilli were fiercely fought over nearly three weeks. Break-in battles are invariably the toughest part of a campaign.

Preamble

No account of the Bangladesh war will ever be complete without an account of the intense battles in the Hilli – Bogra Sector. The Battle of Hilli was undoubtedly one of the most savagely fought battles of the Indo-Pak War of 1971, as fittingly observed by the then Army Commander, Eastern Command, Lieutenant General JS Arora, PVSM, *"Hilli was the bloodiest battle in the then East Pakistan"*. It was a long and bitterly contested battle – it commenced on 22 November 1971 and the final surrender took place on 18 December 1971.The operations were conducted in two phases: the first Battle of Hilli was fought from 22 to 24 November 1971, and the second battle took place on 10 -11 December 1971. Sporadic attacks and counter attacks continued in the intervening period. The first battle was fiercer than the second, as both sides were fully prepared with Pakistani defences fully coordinated and the Pakistani forces having a high morale. By the time of the second battle, their morale had undoubtedly dipped.

The Northwest Sector

The North-west (NW) sector of erstwhile East Pakistan (EP) was primarily the area North of the River

Padma (Ganga in India) and west of the River Jamuna (Brahmaputra in India), with Bogra as an important communication hub connecting the NW and Western sectors through the Hardinge Bridge over the Padma River. NW sector was defended by Pakistan's 16 Infantry Division (Inf Div) commanded by Major General Nazar Hussain. The division with its Headquarters (HQ) at Nator (South-west of Bogra), had under its command 23 Infantry Brigade (Inf Bde) in Dinajpur-Rangpur area, 34 Inf Bde in Rajshahi-Naogaon (area West and Southwest of Bogra) and 205 Inf Bde commanded by Brig Tajammul Hussain Malik in Hilli-Bhaduria-Ghoraghat area. 4 Frontier Force (FF) was defending Hilli, and Bogra was within the operational area of 205 Inf Bde.

The Indian 33 Corps was responsible for operations in the NW sector and included Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur and Rangpur districts. 33 Corps comprised of 20 Mountain Division (Mtn Div), 71 and 9 Mountain Brigades (Mtn Bde), 3 (Independent) Armoured Bde, 471 Engineer Bde and two artillery bdes augmented by 33 Corps Artillery. 20 Mtn Div was commanded by Maj Gen Lachhman Singh Lehl, VrC and integral to it were 202, 165, 66 Mtn Bdes with 340 Mtn Bde Group under its command for operations.

First Battle of Hilli (22 – 24 November 1971)

33 Corps' planned to secure the waist line along the Hilli-Gaibanda axis in the middle of the sector, and thereafter swing Southward to Bogra and the crossing over the Padma river. This would divide Pakistan's 16 Infantry Division, and subsequently, piecemeal destruction of the Pakistani forces North and South of this waist line could be undertaken.

The town of Hilli is located on either side of the International Border (IB), at the mouth of the Indian salient. While the larger, more concentrated built up area was in India, the EP side was sparser with maximum houses around the railway station and high school. An important communication hub (cross roads and rail head), Hilli had roads leading to Bogra, Rangpur, Goraghat and Saidpur. It was operationally and logistically important to capture Hilli to progress operations both to the North and South of the waist line. Fully understanding its operational and tactical importance, Hilli was made a very strong defended locality under 4 FF Regiment ably led by Lieutenant Colonel Abbasi. Villages surrounding Hilli were incorporated into the defences, and in addition screen positions (small dominating positions prepared for all round defence) were created along the railway line and the approaches to critical areas like the railway station, road crossings and high school, which could not be bypassed but had to be physically attacked and cleared. The defences had been stocked, prepared and strengthened over a protracted period. Built-up areas and ponds, surrounded by marshes and dense groves, had been converted into strongpoints to foil attacks. Every house had been fortified into bunkers with weapon emplacements at two levels. To illustrate, Morapara, a village on the outskirts had 72 bunkers with overhead protection even against direct artillery hits.

The Battle of Hilli was fought for 19 consecutive days, starting from the night of November 22/23, 1971 to the night of December 11/12, 1971 - a classic example of attrition warfare by attacking a well-entrenched enemy. Originally, the plan was to capture the entire Hilli town complex with 202 Inf Bde, but the plan was modified (on the express orders of Lieutenant General JS Aurora, Army Commander Eastern Command) to capture only the Westernmost areas namely the villages of Naopara, Morapara and Basudeopur by 8 GUARDS. Unfortunately, due to the marshy and boggy terrain, the squadron armour of 63 CAV allotted could not take off and got stuck in the initial part of the battle itself. Subsequently, the versatile, lighter, amphibious PT 76 tank was employed to great effect. Artillery support was provided by one medium regiment less battery, two mtn regiments and one light battery.

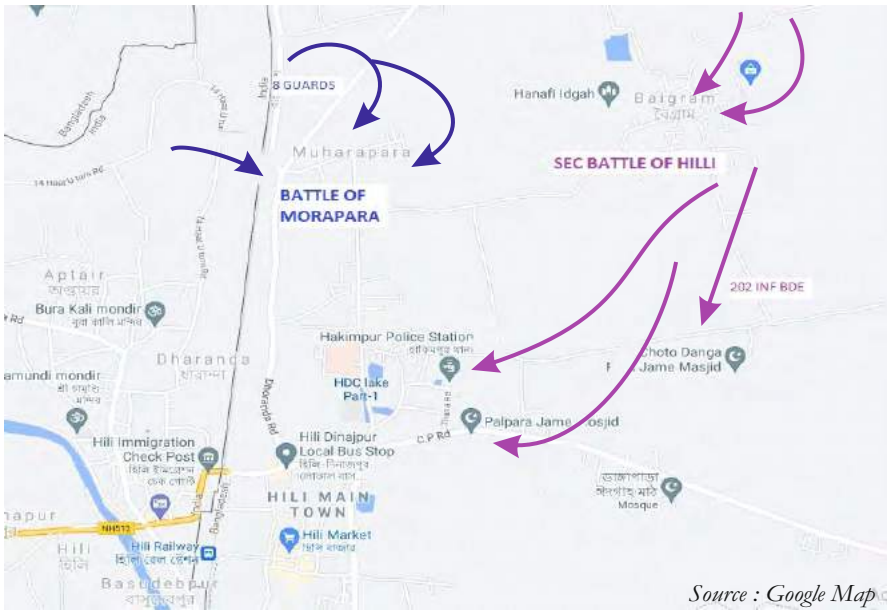
Personally led by Lieutenant Colonel Shamsher Singh, the Commanding Officer (CO) 8 GUARDS launched the attack at last light on 22 November. A relentless pitched battle, involving clearing individual houses and even hand to hand fighting was fought. Officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and soldiers shone through with examples of exceptional courage. Exemplary junior leadership, personal bravery, fortitude and morale of all ranks of 8 GUARDS can be



20 Mtn Div: Flow of Operations *Source : Google Map*

gauged by the fact that all three leading company commanders attained martyrdom in the action. New leaders sprang up as the nominated ones fell. Assaults were carried out by wading through knee deep water, which slowed and weighed them down considerably. The assault was met with intense mortar fire, cross-fire of heavy machine guns sited on the flanks and dense anti-personnel minefields (including fragmentation mines) and booby traps which caused numerous casualties. It is to the credit of the indomitable junior leadership and courage of the troops that the assaulting line did not waver or fall back, and held on in all instances of attack or while facing ferocious enemy counter-attacks. The Pakistani soldiers led by their company commander Major Mohammad Akram of 4 FF fought equally resolutely and bravely for every bunker and inch of ground, and counter attacked swiftly and with fanatical vigour to regain lost ground. The ferocity of the attacks can be gauged by the fact that 8 GUARDS in this one attack in Phase 1 suffered four officers, two JCOs and 54 soldiers killed in action, and four officers, two JCOs and 73 soldiers wounded.

It would be fitting to applaud the professionalism and bravery of the Pakistan Army rank and file during the battle for Hilli. Of special mention are Brigadier Tajammul Hussain Malik, Commander 205 Inf Bde, a man with a fanatical motivation and will to fight, who preferred to remain with his forward troops inspiring them with his presence. He declared that, 'even if I am left alone with my pistol I will not surrender'. Surrender to him was not the fate of a Muslim soldier. Major Mohammad Akram, the Company Commander of 4 FF continued defending Morapara and exhorted his troops by going from platoon to platoon till he was fatally wounded. It is not surprising that he was the only officer in the EP campaign to be awarded the highest gallantry award of Pakistan, the 'Nishan-e-Haider'. Interestingly the first officer to get promoted on being repatriated back to Pakistan from India, where he was held as a prisoner of war (POW) was Brig Tajammul Hussain.



Source : Google Map

Second Battle of Hilli

While sporadic fighting between opposing forces to dominate the area continued between 24 November and 09 December 71, the second battle to capture the remainder areas of Hilli was fought fiercely between 09 and 11 December 71. By this time, the remainder defences of Hilli had been bypassed and Indian forces had advanced further West, and captured the waist line Ghoraghat-Palasbari-Gaibanda, which bisected the defences of 16 Inf Div. Concurrently Indian troops moved North towards Rangpur and South towards Gobindganj, Khetlal and Bogra. 202 Inf Bde under Brig Bhatty with 8 GUARDS, 22 MARATHA LI, 4 RAJPUT and 16 RAJPUT (allotted ex 9 Mtn Bde) was tasked to capture the remainder portions of Hilli which were still holding out. While 8 GUARDS continued to probe and attack enemy positions from East to West and open the road axis Hilli-Ghoraghat, the other battalions attacked from the North-west and North. 8 GUARDS continued with its saga of leadership and courage, and the other battalions too demonstrated incredible resolve and courage. The troops of 4 FF also continued to fight fanatically including launching counter attacks frequently, showing desperate determination on being surrounded, and the Hilli battle continued to remain dogged for every bunker, weapon emplacement and inch of ground. To illustrate, the enemy defences at Barachangram were defended by a company led by Captain Haleem. When finally surrounded, Major Chandrasekharan tried to capture Captain Haleem alive. But Haleem despite repeated offers continued fighting and shouted at Indian troops to "come and take him if they had the courage". Finally, the brave officer was killed. By 11 December evening when it was evident that Hilli would fall and there were more sensitive areas to defend, the remainder Pakistani troops still deployed in and around Hilli were withdrawn for the final battle of Bogra, on the orders of the Divisional Commander (contested vigorously by Brig Tajammul, Cdr 205 Inf Bde).

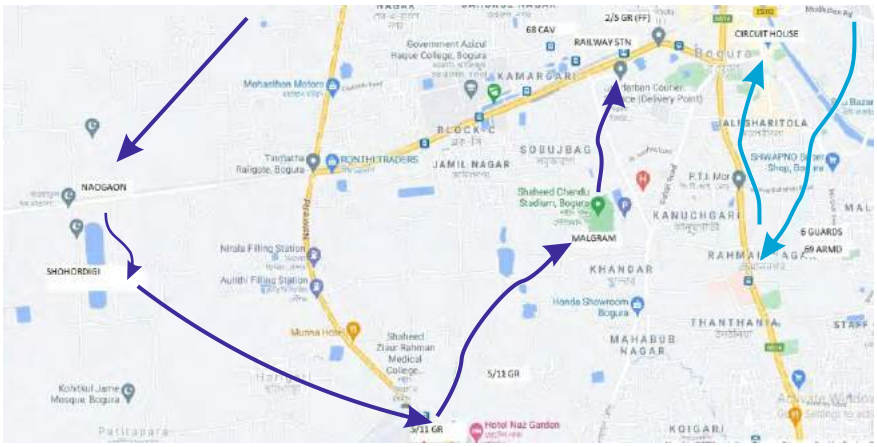
The Final Fight at Bogra

Bogra was the largest town in the Sector, the District HQ and tactical HQ of Pakistan 16 Inf Div defending the entire NW Sector. HQ 205 Mtn Bde was also co-located there. It was a spread-out town with several built up areas, and the

Pakistan forces (mainly battalion ex 205 Inf Bde and remnants of 16 Div who had fallen back) had entrenched themselves for a classic urban warfare battle.

33 Corps/20 Inf Div was progressing operations against the enemy from all directions; 66 Mtn Bde was racing North to capture Rangpur which was defended by the Pakistani 23 Inf Bde; 340 Bde was approaching Bogra from the North after capturing Gobindganj and Manasthal, 202 Bde (minus) was moving along Axis Ghoraghat-Khetlal-Bogra from the North-west, while 165 Bde was moving along axis Hilli-Jaidurhat-Bogra in a race to Bogra. Simultaneously, a wide outflanking move of a Combat Group (69 Armoured Regiment less a Sqn, and 6 GUARDS ex 340 Bde) was executed along Shankarpur-Gabtali-Sajapur to cut off Bogra from the South, which was achieved by 0900 hours on 14 December. The Mukti Bahini (MB) guides were extremely useful to guide the outflanking column to their blocking positions. The Air Force too provided excellent close support for the capture of Bogra. Major General Lachhman Singh, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 20 Inf Div insisted on a very quick capture of Bogra as 340 Inf Bde Group was required to disengage and move to join forces tasked to capture Dhaka.

This was classic 'fighting in built-up area (FIBUA)' involving house to house, street to street and close quarters battle.



Battle of Bogra : 5/11 GR and 6 Guards Source : Google Map

Capture of Bogra

2/5 GR (FF) with a squadron ex 63 CAV led the advance of 340 Bde from the North and was the first to contact Bogra defences while 6 GUARDS was in position by the morning of 14 December, thus isolating Bogra from the South. 5/11 GR was tasked to move cross country and establish the firm base and capture the railway station and clear areas West of the Bogra-Nator road. Like 8 GUARDS in the Battle of Hilli, 5/11 GR bravely and commendably led by Lieutenant Colonel FT Dias played a pivotal role in breaking the initial crust of the enemy defences at Bogra, established a firm base and provided the momentum to the remainder battalions of 340 Bde. 4 MADRAS, an additional battalion allotted to 340 Bde, was tasked to clear areas East of the road Bogra-Nator and link up with 6 GUARDS moving up from the South. 2/5 GR (FF) cleared the area North of the railway line by mid-day on December 14 against stiff opposition.

This was classic 'fighting in built-up area (FIBUA)' involving house to house, street to street and close quarters battle. Like all typical small towns in South Asia, Bogra too had extremely narrow alleys and irregular patterns of houses and streets. This imposed restrictions on operations of PT 76 tanks, and so infantry troops had to do most of the heavy lifting with good support from medium artillery, T 55 tanks and recoilless guns. Troops too took some time to adapt and quickly came up with innovative techniques, drills and manoeuvres to meet the challenge of FIBUA. As per GOC 20 Inf Div, one of the highlights of the attack was a very innovative fire plan involving search and sweep and use of Air OP which had a telling effect on the enemy troops. It was a pitched hard-fought battle, but slowly due to superior tactics and bravery of own troops, enemy positions in Bogra disintegrated. By 15 December evening, rumours of the Pakistan Army in EP surrendering were floating, which further lowered the morale of the Pakistan troops. Many groups found no exit and wanted to give up as they felt the operational situation was hopeless.

The lone leader and commander who kept exhorting, compelling and forcing his troops to fight on, sometime even at gunpoint was Brigadier Tajammul, who also kept inspiring them with the Quranic Ayat that a Muslim soldier does not surrender on the battlefield. His own brigade HQ was constantly under artillery barrage.

From 16 December onwards thick smoke was reported from enemy held areas. They were preparing to surrender and were busy destroying equipment, petrol dumps and other military stores. Loudspeakers were used by Indian troops requesting Pakistani troops to surrender. Large number of troops started surrendering including the Brigade Major of 205 Inf Bde with 50 men of his HQ. Volunteer Pakistani troops went back / were sent back to urge others to surrender. Brigadier Tajammul refused to surrender and along with his orderly and couple of officers tried to escape Southwards. He was caught by civilians and badly beaten up before being handed over to the Mukti Bahini. Brigadier Tajammul was in uniform like a true soldier (he did not try to escape

looking like a civilian) and persuaded them to hand him over to the Indian Army.

The enemy surrendered ceremonially at Rangpur, Dinajpur, Naogong, Ishurdi and other places on 17 December, and GOC 16 Inf Div Major General Nazar Hussain surrendered to GOC 20 Inf Div Major General Lachhman Singh on 18 December 71 at Bogra.

Heroism and Leadership

There were innumerable tales of leadership, camaraderie, courage under fire at the junior and mid-level by officers and men alike. Some of them are highlighted below.

- **Lieutenant Colonel Shamsher Singh**, CO 8 GUARDS was the epitome of a leader and Yodha, moving about and inspiring his men while staying right in the front lines throughout the attack on Hilli. He lost many of his officers and JCOs. He was awarded a well-deserved Maha Vir Chakra for his personal gallantry and leadership.
- **Major HD Manjrekar**, company commander, 8 GUARDS led the assault through wire obstacles, knee deep marshy bogs aggravated by heavy machine gun fire. He exhorted his men to 'follow him', and was fatally wounded leading his brave men.
- **2nd Lieutenant SS Samra**, part of Major Manjrekar's company was leading the left forward assault platoon and received a burst of MMG fire on the right side of his chest, but continued charging towards the MMG bunker and destroyed it by lobbing a grenade. When moving towards the second bunker he collapsed on receiving another burst of small arms fire, still clutching a grenade, a picture of grit, determination and single-minded purpose.
- **Guardsman Kailash Nath Tiwari**. In the initial stages of the assault of Hilli, he was wounded, but continued to fight on courageously. He destroyed a heavy machine gun bunker which was causing several casualties by rushing and throwing a grenade. He picked up the machine gun with ammunition and rushed towards another enemy bunker, killing another Pakistani soldier who was targeting him, and was fatally wounded in the process of throwing a second grenade.
- **Naib Subedar Mohammed Nayeem**, Platoon Commander in B Coy, 8 GUARDS was shot up in his left arm, but continued leading his platoon and got shot once again in his leg. He could not be evacuated due to withering enemy fire, and lay in a pool of blood. At daybreak, observing enemy movement he once again charged at the enemy with bayonets fixed, and successfully shot a couple of the retreating enemy soldiers before succumbing to his wounds.
- **Major Ravinder Nath**, B Company Commander continued leading his troops in the attack despite getting wounded in the initial charge. His wireless operator got shot up in the knees but he continued undaunted to accomplish his mission.
- **Captain Seshadari,** Company Commander 5 GARHWAL RIFLES who was leading one of the platoons was shot in the leg and continued attacking, and as per his own words "I did not realise that I was wounded until the attack was over"!
- **Major Dadkar** of 22 Maratha Light Infantry was fatally wounded while rescuing his platoon commander who lay wounded caught under enemy fire. He picked up the wounded JCO and carried him to safety in spite of relentless accurate enemy fire. Just as he reached cover of his own position, he was wounded fatally by a machine gun burst. He deservedly was awarded a Vir Chakra posthumously.
- **Brigadier Tajammul Hussain Malik**, Commander Pakistan 205 Inf Bde led his formation for the defence of Hilli, Bhaduri, Pirgunj with courage, zeal and fanaticism. He refused to surrender or even participate in the 'Surrender Ceremony', which was done by flying in Major General Hussain Shah who was flown in from Nator to Bogra especially for the occasion.
- **Major Mohammad Akram**, the Pakistani company commander at Morapara, which bore the brunt of 8 GUARDS attack, held on resolutely and launched numerous counter attacks was an epitome of courage and leadership of his troops and was awarded the Nishan-e-Haidar, the highest gallantry award of the Pakistan Army posthumously.







(Upper Left) Mrs Gandhi congratulates Lt Col Shamsher Singh at the Investiture Ceremony. (Lower left) Lt Col Shamsher Singh addresses the troops before the Battle of Morapara. (Right) Atop a destroyed Pakistani tank. Photo credit rediff.com

Mukti Bahini (MB)

The Pakistan Army along with the 'biharis' had created an atmosphere of terror in the population. The villagers were scared to provide logistics and intelligence support to the MB as Pakistani retaliation was brutal and ruthless. However, once the Indian operations officially began they did better and many leaders propped up in different areas showing great enterprise. The MB contributed substantially to the operational cause, as they undermined the will of Pakistani forces and kept the flame of revolt burning fiercely.

Review

Brigadier Tajammul's (later Major General) candid views on the state of Pakistan Army and what caused the developments leading to the dismemberment of Pakistan are interesting:- *"From 1947 up till 1958, Pakistan Army was a small Army but highly competent and dedicated to the profession. We had very simple living but took pride in the profession and being men in uniform. Therefore, all its efforts were concentrated on professional training and loyalty to the Constitutional Government. However, after the proclamation of Martial Law in 1958, its priorities changed. Martial law changes the very outlook of a soldier towards his profession or his duty to the state. Loyalty to Ayub Khan and the ruling junta was given top priority whereas training in the Army and its obligation to the State were relegated to the second position. Our senior officers started indulging in accumulation of wealth and building palatial houses. The higher leadership was mostly incompetent. Thus, the seed for the disintegration of Pakistan was sown. And after about ten years or so it resulted in the break-up of Pakistan in the 1971 war. Had we not lived under martial law from 1958 onwards and remained a professional army, as in the past, I have no doubt that we would have decisively defeated the Indian Army both in the 1965 and 71 wars.*

Specifically, on Pakistan Army's potential in EP, he stated *"We had enough resources in way of equipment and manpower to continue the war for at least six months. There was absolutely no justification for surrender. It was, perhaps, the guilt conscience weighing heavy on the minds of the Commanders, who had committed atrocities during the cleaning up operations. Had General Niazi and his team of Generals and Brigadiers decided to stand and fight, the Indian Army would never have succeeded in reaching even the fringes of Dacca.*



(Upper) Brig JS Bakshi, Lt Col Shamsher Singh and other officers after the battle. Photo credit rediff.com (Lower photos, from left to right) Maj Gen Lachhman Singh Lehl, Lt Col Shamsher Singh, Major Mohammad Akram, Brigadier Tajammul Hussain, Lt Col FT Dias.

20 Inf Div accepted the surrender of 304 officers, 371 JCOs, 11218 men plus over 6000 Pakistani para-military personnel. Not one Bengali officer in entire EP remained with the Pakistan Army. 20 Inf Div troops were deservedly awarded a number of gallantry awards which included a PVSM (Major General Lachhman Singh, VrC), four MVCs, one AVSM, 19 VrCs, 35 Sena Medals and numerous Mention-in Despatches. The battle honour of Hilli and Bogra was also conferred on 8 GUARDS and 5/11 GR respectively. For its exceptional valour shown in the capture of Hilli, 8 GUARDS commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel Shamsher Singh, led the Republic Day Parade in 1972.

Ultimately, victory depends on the manner in which the game is played and fought. The decisive role of leadership was apparent in this war. The standards of 'jus in bello' and 'jus ad bellum' provided the moral superiority to fight. The 'Liberation of Bangladesh' remains one of the grandest geo-political events of the 21st Century for which the Indian Armed Forces can be justifiably proud, and the Battles of Hilli and Bogra played a pivotal role.



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Lt Gen Sagat Singh chatting with his troops. Photo courtesy nayaindia.com

DHAKA IN HIS SIGHTS

General Sagat Singh's Disruptive Tempo

Lieutenant General Sagat Singh has rightly been credited as the operational level architect, who engineered the collapse of the Pakistan Army opposite Tripura, thereby opening the doors to Dhaka in a lightning campaign. His aide-de-camp during the war narrates the actions in this blitzkrieg.

A great upsurge took place in March 1971, when the Pakistan Army cracked down on the people of East Pakistan (EP). There was a massive refugee influx into neighbouring Indian states and the revolt of the units of the East Bengal Regiment and some paramilitary forces created violent uncertainty all along the border. The situation became more volatile when independence was declared on 27 March 71 and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was imprisoned. Mrs Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister was hopeful of a quick resolution, and directed General SHFJ Manekshaw, COAS, to invade and liberate EP. The Chief was firm and declined to do so till he was ready. If a window did exist, it was closed by July with the onset of the monsoons and the induction of two Pakistan Divisions into EP. Lieutenant General AAK Niazi, the Pakistani Army Commander in Dhaka, created three sectors under a division each with Chittagong under an independent brigade. The border got active as Indian formations deployed and prepared for the looming violent conflict.

Being surrounded on three sides by India created a unique defence dilemma for Niazi. He was also worried that India may carve out an enclave from where a government of the newly created state of Bangladesh could function. After various defensive options were wargamed, Niazi went in for the 'fortress' strategy. Designated nodal points were converted into fortresses



Gen Manekshaw addresses the troops at Dhaka in December 1971, Lt Gen Sagat Singh is to his right. Photo courtesy bharatrakshak.com

stocked with weapons, ammunition and rations, which would enable them to hold out for 45 days. Selected nodal points, along the approaches to the fortresses, were converted into strong points. Strong reserves were nominated that would fix and destroy any ingress. Dhaka's defences were to be based on the rivers that ringed it and would be held to the last man, by when it was hoped, international pressure would put a stop to hostilities. As Indian pressure mounted, Niazi created two additional divisional headquarters. He decided to hold the frontier strongly, till '75% casualties occurred,' and deployed his reserves onto the border. This played into India's hands once the offensive commenced. His planners also appreciated that the main offensive would likely be from the West.

By April, Lieutenant General JS Aurora, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Eastern Command, had been apprised about the general scope of the offensive. At Army HQ, Major General KK Singh, the Director of Military Operations (DMO), started planning the offensive in his thorough and meticulous manner. Lieutenant General Sagat Singh was informed of his likely role by May. In July, Aurora flew down to Tezpur and briefed Sagat and his divisional commanders of the Corps offensive. Tripura was designated as the launch pad and tasks were laid down. It was made clear that the Corps was supposed to go only up to the Meghna river line.

The bare bones of the plan were: -

a) The Command would block and isolate East Pakistan.
b) The enemy defences would be segmented by offensives on three major thrust lines.
c) All nodal points and communication centres would be bypassed and isolated.

Dhaka as an objective was not defined. Aurora clarified that once the offensive met its initial objectives an appraisal would be carried out for the capture of Dhaka. Sagat was warned to be prepared to shed 23 Division for the assault on Dhaka.

In August, the COAS visited Kolkata and the DMO laid out the plan in detail.

a) The newly raised 2 Corps was tasked to advance from the West towards Khulna and capture it. Its two divisions were to go on divergent axes. The Corps Commander was only posted once the plan was wargamed and he had to accept a fait accompli. One of his division commanders was strongly opposed to the tasking and that affected the subsequent execution.
b) 33 Corps, with one of its divisions and two additional brigades, was tasked to slice the Hilli-Gaibanda Neck. The General Officer Commanding (GOC) was not satisfied with his tasking, and it told on his relations with the Army Commander.
c) 4 Corps was tasked to reach the Meghna river line, contain Sylhet and, if possible, capture Chittagong.
d) An additional thrust from Meghalaya via Mymensingh towards Dhaka was made the responsibility of 101 Communication Zone Area and was allotted only one brigade. Despite requests, Sam was loath to denude the Chinese border of any units, at least till the snow made operations unviable.

Major General KK Singh had little confidence in the ability of the Indian Army to capture Dhaka swiftly and so preferred that EP be surrounded and cut off before additional operations could be carried out.

Sagat was most dissatisfied with his tasking. He conveyed this to Aurora but thereafter kept things close to his chest. He reconnoitred the operational area twice in the teeth of the monsoon and realised the full magnitude of his task. The refugees who had entered Tripura in lakhs were employed to set up the infrastructure of the maintenance areas and headquarters. The single road through Shillong had to be widened and the bridges strengthened for the medium guns and armour to move up. The rickety 240 km metre gauge line required major work and the railhead at Dharmanagar had to be improved to take on additional trains. Many Border Roads Task Force (BRTF) resources were employed and by 15 October most tasks had been nearly completed. Sagat used the stick from time to time.

Sagat was allotted the two Counterinsurgency (CI) Divisions, 8 and 57, and 23 Division from his own reserves at 4 Corps. These formations started moving to their nominated areas and securing their launch pads in Tripura, which formed a wedge into EP. The large number of logistic units and stores were carefully staged and located without overwhelming the infrastructure of the underdeveloped state. At the last moment additional bridging equipment, which

played a vital role in the advance, was moved in.

Mizoram, where CI operations were going on, was put under command Sagat, who was also allotted the 110 Helicopter Unit of 10 Mi-4 helicopters. An aging warhorse, these helicopters were to be replaced by the MI-8, which only happened after the war. All remnants of the battalions of the East Bengal Regiment, after incurring heavy losses combating the Pakistan Army, had withdrawn into Tripura, and were placed under Sagat's command.

The terrain was generally flat and dominated by three major river systems. The Barak, with its catchment area in the hills of Meghalaya, received the vast outpouring of the monsoons and is 300 metre wide when it enters EP. There it bifurcates into the Surma and the Kusiyara and forms the Atgram Salient. Both the rivers flow East to West, parallel to each other and inundate the low-lying areas around Sylhet. They then turn South to join and form the Meghna that flows North to South and carries more water than the Himalayan rivers. West of Agartala was the unique Titas River System, formed by a lagoon created by the Meghna and the outflow from the hills of Tripura. A perennial system, it gets blocked with hyacinth, which prevented its water channels from flowing smoothly into the Meghna. This again resulted in a great deal of water logging. South of Agartala flowed the Gumti, 100-metre wide when it entered East Pakistan. It flowed East to West, North of a unique low lying hill range called the Lalmai Heights, near the city of Comilla. The Pakistan Army Maynamati Cantonment was located there and had been nominated as a fortress by Niazi. The Corps Centre Line would ultimately be along the river. Further South, flowing eastwards into the Meghna were the Dakatia Nala and the Feni River.
With army units deployed, the border started heating up as Niazi was not willing to surrender the initiative. Skirmishes increased and culminated in three major preliminary operations before hostilities commenced. From 26 October to 04 November, the first major brigade level action took place in the Corps Sector at the Battle of Dhalai. It was fiercely fought with a number of casualties on both sides. Unfortunately, the Pakistani senior leadership did not realise that while India had a smooth reinforcement and replacement system, they had none as all military reinforcements had come to a standstill from West Pakistan.



Lt Gen Sagat Singh (centre) with Maj Gen KV Krishna Rao and Hav Dil Bahadur Chettri at Sylhet. Photo courtesy EasternCommand_IA/Twitter

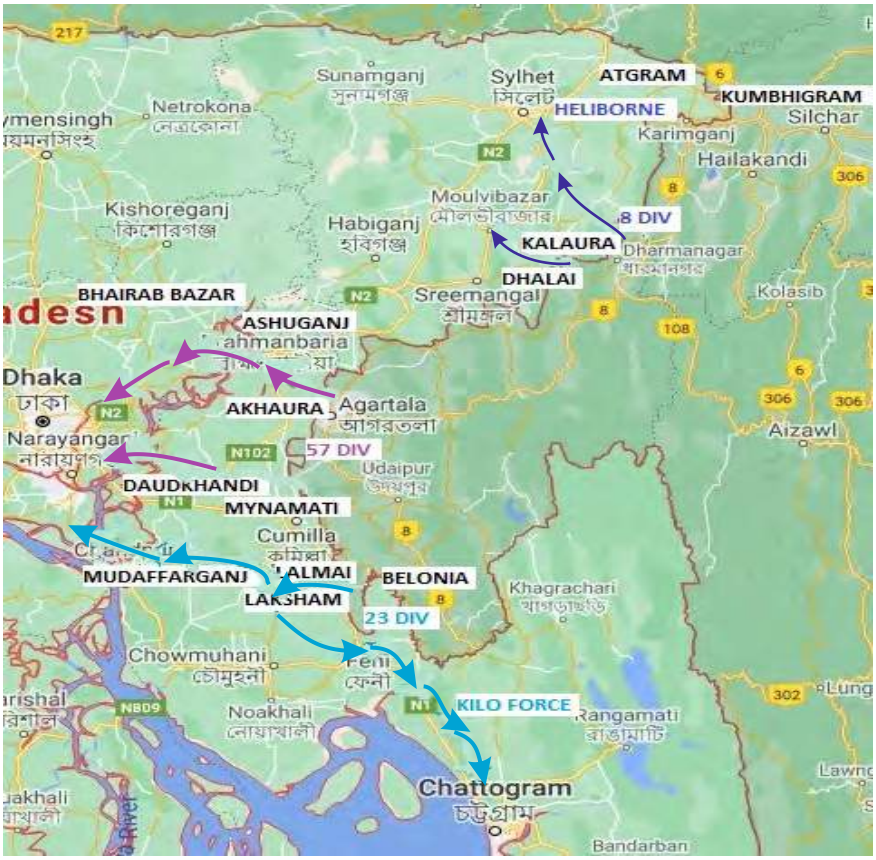
The second action was at the Atgram Salient. On 20 November, a brigade size action removed this threat to Cachar. A third, this time a division level action, took place at the Belonia Bulge South of the Corps Sector. The Bulge was like a dagger pointing to the heart of South Tripura. 23 Division was involved in clearing the Bulge from 5 November till the end of the month. Sagat made use of this operation to put into place a deception plan.

These were fierce battles and Niazi was convinced that any Indian Army ingress would result in severe bloodletting. He modified his strategy by insisting that the borders be held in strength. He even moved his reserve, 53 Brigade, which had been deployed for the defence of Dhaka, towards the border. He created two ad hoc division headquarters from the troops he had, resulting in diffusion of his resources. After a time he started believing, like Hitler, that his formations were up to their organisational strength when he had himself transferred units to other formations.

4 Corps plans were as follows: -

a) 8 Mountain Division with its two brigades was to advance on convergent axes and isolate Sylhet. In case a brigade was not taken away, it was then to capture Brahmanbaria, the headquarters of Pakistan's 14 Division.
b) 57 Mountain Division was to protect Agartala and then capture Akhaura with two brigades. Its 61 Brigade was to isolate Maynamati. Once that was done the Division was to reach the Meghna river line at Daudkhandi by D plus 11. If required, it was to capture Chittagong.
c) 23 Mountain Division was to isolate enemy defences at Lalmai from the West and South, clear Comilla and then capture Chandpur on the Meghna by D plus 8.
d) The ad hoc Kilo Force was to clear the enemy in the South and isolate Chittagong from the North.
e) A brigade ex 8 Mountain Division was to be made available as Corps Reserve from D plus 6.

This was a conventional orthodox plan guided by HQ Eastern Command and Sagat was, to say the least, unhappy. The Corps was well poised when operations commenced after the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) attacked airfields in the Western



Operations of 4 Corps. Source : Google Map

Theatre. Within three days the Indian Air Force (IAF) had established its supremacy over the skies of EP.

On 29 November, 8 Mountain Division had already commenced its operations with the two brigades under its command. 81 Brigade commenced its advance on the Maulvi Bazaar axis with its first objective being the Shamshernagar Airfield, which was captured after a hard-fought battle. 59 Brigade was put on an indifferent road to Kalaura and tasked to head for Sylhet. While 81 Brigade would outflank from the South and firmly segment the Sector, 59 Brigade would tie down troops around Sylhet. This had far reaching implications as Pakistan's 14 Division was unable to get any reinforcements once 57 Division operations progressed West of Agartala.

On 1 December, 57 Mountain Division commenced a set piece divisional attack at night for the capture of Akhaura, the town opposite Agartala. The attack was to be carried out in three phases. It was a fierce battle of attrition against Pakistan's 27 Brigade and went on till 06 December.

The plans of 23 Mountain Division underwent a change at the last minute much to the annoyance of the Chief Engineer who had to scramble to provide resources. The Division, after the preliminary operations along the border, decided to infiltrate between the nodal points of Lalmai and Laksham, a gap of just 10 kms, easily dominated by artillery fire. Major General 'Rocky' Hira, the GOC got the Corps Commander on board by modifying the plan to capture Maynamati and infiltrated two brigades through the gap. Rahim Khan, the Pakistani GOC, played into his hands by strongly denying the border. Once the infiltration succeeded, enemy units, desperately trying to reach their main defences, were ambushed and dispersed or forced to surrender. Even Rahim Khan managed to escape by the skin of his teeth. Once the infiltration progressed to the depth area, the nodal points were invested till they cracked, as Laksham ultimately did.

6 December was the defining day for the Corps offensive, when Sagat completely changed his plans. The brigades of 8 Mountain Division had succeeded in breaking the crust on both axes that they were advancing on, after a couple of hard-fought battles. 57 Division had succeeded in capturing Akhaura, again after some grim fighting where Indian troops, notably 10 BIHAR, suffered heavy casualties. 23 Division had succeeded in capturing Mudaffarganj, a communication junction, from where the road to Chandpur lay open.

Written instructions were just pieces of paper as far as Sagat was concerned and he changed the tempo and tenor of the offensive.

As Sagat widened the scope of his campaign, the enemy played into his hand. On 7 December, he tasked Group Captain Chandan Singh, the Air Force Station Commander of Kumbhigram, to do an air reconnaissance of Sylhet and ordered Major General Krishna Rao, GOC 8 Mountain Division, to carry out a heliborne operation by 4/5 GR (FF), the first in the history of the Indian Army. The enemy had become so defensive minded that he took no action against the landing and only hastened his withdrawal towards Sylhet.

Meanwhile, the axis of advance of 57 Division was changed by nearly 90 degrees and it was ordered to move towards Brahmanbaria and then on to Ashuganj on the Meghna, which had the only bridge across the river. The advance effectively isolated the Sylhet Sector of the enemy. Sagat took 61 Brigade of 57 Division under command and told it to bypass Maynamati from the North and reach Daudkhandi on the Meghna as rapidly as possible. Initially the Brigade had no road axis to build up on and had to depend on mules, which Sagat, with rare foresight, had made a part of his orbat. While at Burichang, where 61 Brigade was building up, Sagat got into an acrimonious argument with General Aurora. The Army

Commander suspected that Sagat was planning to bounce the Meghna River and ordered him forthrightly not to cross the river. Sagat refused and the argument was only resolved once Aurora met him the next day and acquiesced to the change in plan.

On 9 December, 4 Corps relentless advance had succeeded in isolating the enemy in Sylhet and Krishna Rao was asked to make a brigade available at Agartala for a future heliborne operation. Sagat was relentlessly roaming the battlefield in an Allouette helicopter. First he flew over Daudkhandi, realised it had been vacated and flew to Chandpur. He landed ahead of the leading elements of 23 Division, picked up the commanding officer and squadron commander of the leading elements, did an air reconnaissance, dropped them back and told them to go hell for leather. He then flew East of Daudkhandi and landed in front of the leading company commander of 12 Kumaon and told him to rush to the river and commandeer all boats. He then flew to Agartala. Sagat picked up the squadron commander and 2iC of the Air Force Helicopter Unit and did a reconnaissance of the likely landing areas across the river. While returning, he saw the grain silos at Ashuganj blowing up. He immediately flew there and was fired upon by a Medium Machine Gun (MMG). The pilot was injured and so was Sagat on the forehead. The co-pilot deftly manoeuvred the helicopter to Agartala, where Sagat learnt that the enemy had caused casualties to the advancing troops. He commandeered an Air Force helicopter, landed at Brahmanbaria, where the troops for the heliborne operation across the Meghna River were staging. After meeting Major General 'Ben' Gonsalves, GOC 57 Division and Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Himmeth Singh, the CO of 4 GUARDS, which was flying across the Meghna, he flew back to the Corps HQ, where he allowed his injury to be addressed. It was the most momentous day of the campaign.

That night the 10 Mi4 helicopters of 110 Helicopter Unit flew across the Meghna in wave after wave, flying 4 GUARDS and other units of 311 Brigade across. Other units including medium guns



were ferried across the river while the PT 76 tanks swum across. The operation gave a tremendous boost in acceleration for the advance to Dhaka. Major General Kazi Abdul Majid of 14 Pakistan Division, with his HQ and nearly a brigade worth of troops, was penned up at Bhairab Bazaar, just across from Ashuganj, and played no further part in the campaign.

By 15 December, 301 Brigade of 23 Division had crossed over from Daudkhandi and was threatening Dhaka from the East. 311 Brigade led by 4 GUARDS advanced from the NE, while 73 Brigade, after crossing the Meghna River, was threatening Dhaka from the North. With 101 Communication Zone troops also on the outskirts of Dhaka, the city was in the vice like grip of the Indian Army. Meanwhile 83 Brigade of 23 Division, after capturing Laksham infiltrated from a flank and threatened Chittagong.

Niazi had frittered his troops away and had no alternative but to surrender his command at the Ramna Racecourse at Dhaka on 16 December.

Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, had set his sights on Dhaka and ensured that the momentum of his advance was continuously maintained by personal example and adroit modification of the plans, where required. Nothing could stand in his way as he used the resources at his disposal ingenuously and propelled the Gajraj Corps, and the Indian Armed Forces to victory.



Major General KS Randhir Sinh, *UYSM, AVSM, SM (Retd), born on 06 Apr 1947 underwent schooling at the Mayo College, Ajmer. He followed the family tradition by joining the Indian Army and was commissioned into 4/3 GR in 1968. He has a rich and varied experience of various operational and counter insurgency areas, including the Siachen Glacier. He was the ADC to Lieutenant General Sagat Singh during the 1971 War, and was witness to the operations of 4 Corps. He is a fellow of the Royal College of Defence Studies, London and having walked from Ladakh to Arunachal in the Himalayas is a member of the Himalayan Club. He holds the Chhatrapati Shivaji Chair of Excellence awarded by the United Services Institution of India.*



Maj Gen KV Krishna Rao, GOC 8 Mtn Div, Brig Quinn, Brigade Commander and officers of 4/5 GR (FF) discussing the plan. Photo courtesy bharatrakshak.com

THE SYLHET HELIBORNE OPERATION

The Sylhet Heliborne operation was the first heliborne operation after independence executed during war by the Indian Armed Forces. The operation was a phenomenal success and tied down two brigades of the enemy in Sylhet. It is an example of grit and resilience of the Gorkha troops.

Battles are won or lost in the minds of men; before they are won or lost on the ground
- Brigadier Desmond Hayde, MVC

I was doing the Staff Course in 1971 at the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington in the Nilgiri Hills when war clouds began looming on the horizon. We heard about the atrocities and genocide perpetrated on the people of East Pakistan (EP) by the Pakistani Army. In April-May, we learnt that over a million people had been massacred in EP and that over 10 million had crossed over into India as refugees. My unit, the 4th Battalion the 5th Gorkha Rifles (FF) moved to the border with EP in October 1971.

The Staff College course was terminated in the third week of November and we were given a few days to leave our families home and join our units. I left my wife and children at her parents' home and reached Delhi at around 8.30 pm on 03 December to find Delhi in a blackout. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had attacked Indian airfields at 5.30 pm that evening. So, now we were at war with Pakistan!

The next morning, 4 December 1971, I reached Palam airfield and was told that the Indian Air Force (IAF) courier to Guwahati had been cancelled because a



Alouette helicopter fitted with LMG and rocket pods to provide cover during the Sylhet landing. Photo courtesy Bangladesh Air Force

transport aircraft full of officers and jawans would be a lucrative target for the PAF. We rushed off to New Delhi Railway station and caught the Assam Mail just as it was steaming out.

It took us three days to reach Dharmanagar Railway Station which was closest to where my battalion was deployed. A JCO from the unit was positioned at this station to meet and move all Battalion personnel returning from leave and courses of instruction. He told me that the Battalion had already taken part in two battles and that we had suffered heavy casualties. He added that a hospital train would be passing through in about an hours' time and that four officers who had been wounded in these battles would be on the train. I decided to wait for the train and meet the officers.

The hospital train arrived after about two hours and in the meanwhile, the JCO brought me up to date on what had happened so far. He told me that the Battalion had launched an attack at Atgram and decimated a company of Pakistan's 31 Punjab, mainly with the use of their khukris. Due to this success, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, the Corps Commander ordered the Battalion to capture another enemy position at Gazipur. Here too, we succeeded where another battalion had failed. These attacks however took a heavy toll on the Battalion. We had entered the war with eighteen officers and in these two battles, three officers had been killed and four officers were wounded. The JCO also mentioned that he had received information that the unit was to move shortly for a heliborne attack.

Lieutenant Colonel Arun Harolikar, our Commanding Officer (CO), a brave and competent officer, had asked for a few days to reorganise the battalion and to train the new formed teams for future tasks, when he received a telephone call from Brigadier 'Bunty' Quinn, the Brigade Commander, that the battalion had to move immediately for a heliborne task to capture Sylhet.

The CO protested. The men had not slept for four days, they had not had time to bathe or to eat hot food for more than a week and he needed time to weld the newly formed teams. The Brigade Commander told the CO that he had protested as much, but he was overruled. In the Army, you can protest up to a point. After that, orders are orders.

Lieutenant Colonel Harolikar knew that the Brigade Commander would have desisted as far as possible; so, he said: "OK Sir. Tell me when I have to move." The Brigade Commander drove over and explained the task to the CO.

Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 4 Corps had informed the Brigade Commander that Pakistan's 202 Infantry Brigade which was holding Sylhet had moved for the defence of Dhaka, that there were only about 200 razakars (irregular soldiers) holding Sylhet and that he wanted to capture Sylhet before it was reinforced and he wanted the Gorkhas to do it. When told that the Gorkhas had been given four days to recoup from the effects of the battles of Atgram and Gazipur, he told the Brigade Commander, "I know the Gorkhas. They are best suited for this task. Tell them to move immediately to Kalaura, the base for the heliborne operation."

The unit reached Kalaura by the evening of 06 December 1971. Group Captain Chandan Singh of the IAF, arrived in an Allouette helicopter at 9.30 am on 7th December and took off with the CO for an air reconnaissance (recce) of Sylhet and to select a landing site for the battalion.

The CO selected Mirapara on the North bank of the Surma River as the landing site for the battalion. This was South East of Sylhet and about three kilometres from the railway bridge. The recce team saw no enemy movement and this seemed to confirm the Corps Commander's information that Sylhet did not have a large enemy force.

At the DSSC we were taught that joint planning and joint command and control was essential for the success of paradrops and heliborne operations. It was also taught that when a battalion is paradropped or helilanded behind enemy lines, it should be linked up within 48 hours, failing which it would disintegrate due to casualties, lack of ammunition and supplies. And here, we were given orders to prepare for a heliborne operation on 6th December, a recce was undertaken at 0930 hours on 7th December, and the fly in was to commence at 1430 hours – the quickest launch of a heliborne operation in military history! There is often a big difference in class room teaching and the reality of war.

Back from the recce by 1030 hours, the CO had just about 30 minutes to make his plan and give his orders. There were multiple issues to attend to, before the fly

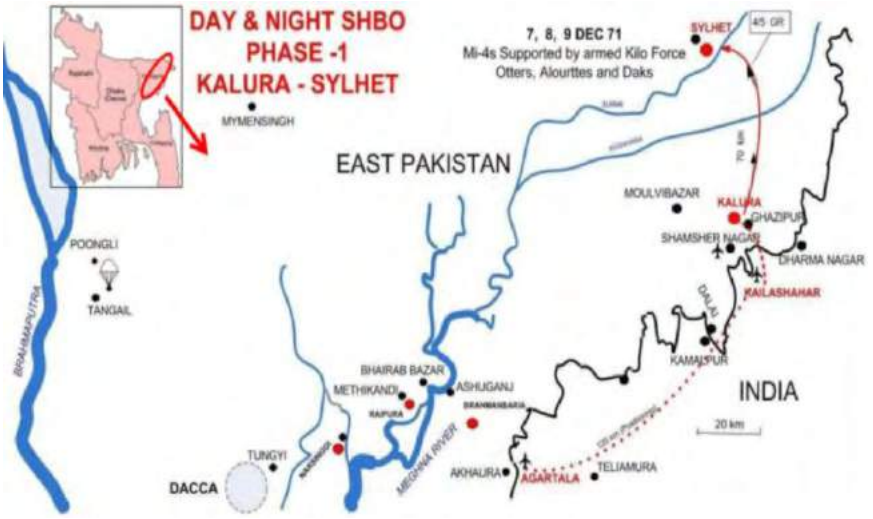
in to Sylhet could commence. The CO asked as to when the link up would take place and he was again assured that the link up would take place within 48 hours.

There were however many unanswered questions. Why would 202 Brigade move for the defence of Dhaka? Sylhet gave depth to Dhaka and fighting away from Dhaka made more sense. Sylhet was also part of a chain of defences that formed part of the strategy of General Niazi to defend EP. Why would he give up Sylhet without a fight? What if the brigade had not moved out? Were there only 200 razakars defending Sylhet? How could he capture his objectives without artillery support? How would casualties be evacuated?

Being skeptical about the assurance that the link up would take place within 48 hours, the CO suggested that the big packs of all ranks which contained a blanket, a change of clothes and other essentials be left behind and that we take more ammunition and grenades instead. The officers and JCOs readily agreed. He gave them the order in which the fly in would take place, their tasks on landing at Sylhet, the need to immediately dig in and for all round-defence and to conserve ammunition because all that they would have, is what they could take with them.

In the meanwhile, I was driving non-stop, day and night to reach in time to be part of the heliborne operation and learnt that the aim of the operation was the capture of Sylhet. I arrived at Kalaura at 0300 hours on 08 December. The moon was dipping into the horizon and by its pale light I could see the dark, shadowy outline of four MI-4 helicopters and soldiers of my battalion asleep in groups. Soldiers learn to sleep anywhere and at any time because they know they may not get time to sleep once the battle starts. I walked up to them and met the JCOs and NCOs who were awake. It was a joy meeting these men who had been part of my life not so long ago. They pointed me to a group of three officers standing some distance away.

I walked up to them and the tallest one came forward and asked: "Who is it?" "Major Ian Cardozo, 2iC designate of the battalion reporting for duty sir," I answered. "Welcome to the division Ian, I am Krishna Rao, GOC of the Division. Meet your brigade commander Brigadier Bunty Quinn."



(Map depicting flight path of heliborne operation. Map courtesy rediff.com)

Brigadier Quinn took me aside and brought me up to date as to what had transpired up to then. He told me that three companies and the Battalion Headquarters had been landed at Sylhet the previous day and that fierce fighting was presently going on. Apparently, the enemy was in strength and were doing their best to destroy the battalion.

While we were talking, we heard the sound of the previous wave of helicopters which were returning from Sylhet. The helicopters alighted like giant birds of prey and a number of wounded soldiers were unloaded.

We quickly boarded our helicopters and took off for Sylhet. The pilots were brave, young officers who took every imaginable risk to land the battalion against heavy fire from the Pakistanis who were doing their best to take down the helicopters in the air and on the ground. We could hear the crack of the bullets from ground fire as they penetrated the soft skin of the helicopters and I wondered whether any of us would get hit even before we could take part in the battle. However, God was on our side and none of us got hurt.

We landed in the midst of heavy artillery and Medium Machine Gun (MMG) fire. Enemy artillery rounds were throwing up great mounds of earth as they landed all around us and the rattle of enemy MMGs told us that the enemy was in strength. The unit had beaten back two counter attacks but for some reason the enemy did not press home their attacks. Possibly the enemy did not have the stomach for close combat with us, after they had tasted the cold steel of our khukris at Atgram and Gazipur.

As soon as I had jumped down from the helicopter, I was greeted by the smiling faces of the boys of Alpha Company that I had commanded in the 1965 war. They were very glad to see me and hoisted me on their shoulders and started dancing and shouting, *"Cartoos Saab' ho ki hoina."*[1] It was with difficulty that I was able to persuade them to put me down, and I went off to meet the CO who was controlling the battle on his wireless set.

[1] "Cartoos Saab ho ki hoina" was just a joyous welcome. The men were expressing their happiness that I had rejoined the Battalion.

The CO welcomed me to the battalion and said that he had been waiting for me for a long time because he wanted someone with reasonable experience to take over from him, if he became a casualty. He also told me that the Corps and Division had repeatedly told him that 202 Pakistan Brigade that was holding Sylhet had moved for the defence of Dhaka and there was no worthwhile strength holding Sylhet. But it appeared from the strong opposition that we were facing, that this information was wrong.

What we didn't know at that time was that Pakistan's 202 Infantry Brigade had not left Sylhet and that 313 Pakistan Brigade had arrived to reinforce Sylhet on the evening of 7 December, just as our troops were landing. Our strength was just 384 and we were therefore totally outnumbered in the ratio of 1: 20. Fortunately, we did not know this, and we kept sending out patrols to find out the strength and dispositions of the enemy. Patrol clashes took place, but we managed to dominate the ground in front of us.

Based on the assumption that there was no worthwhile enemy holding Sylhet, the Division had tasked the unit to not only hold on to the ground captured but to also capture the Sylhet Broadcasting Station and the railway bridge 3 kilometres to the North of the town. Even in the best of circumstances, this was a task for a brigade and not for an understrength battalion.

In the next two days, we extended the perimeter of our defended locality and patrolled the ground ahead of us aggressively. In addition to the rifle companies, an Air Control Team (ACT) and two mountain guns had also been landed. The ACT had occupied a vantage point from where Flying Officer Sharma, the officer commanding the ACT, could see the enemy positions. He asked for fighter aircraft operating from Kumbhigram to attack and destroy the Pakistani artillery gun positions that were causing casualties amongst our men. Our MiG 21 fighters based at Kumbhigram were over our position within minutes and took on the Pakistani artillery which was forced to go into hides.

We were now certain that we were faced with a strong Pakistani force. Our limited supply of food and water had finished and we were running low on ammunition. We drank water from muddy ponds which we strained through our handkerchiefs and ate grain which we could scrape from abandoned huts within the perimeter of our defended area. By the evening of 9 December, more than 48 hours had elapsed and there was no sign or talk of the promised link up.



Wave of Mi-4 Helicopters heading for Sylhet

However, on the evening of 9 December we heard a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) broadcast on our lone transistor radio. The BBC correspondent reported that a brigade of Gorkhas had landed at Sylhet. This was an obvious mistake by a broadcasting station that had an excellent reputation for broadcasting credible news. Everyone listened to the BBC because they knew that what they said was true. This time however, they had made a mistake. The correspondent must have got mixed up between 'brigade' and 'battalion'. The CO and I decided to take advantage of this fortuitous mistake and to pretend we were a brigade because we knew that the Pakistanis were also listening to the BBC.

We redeployed our companies to simulate a wider front. This meant bigger gaps between the companies and diminished ability to interlock the arcs of fire of the light machine guns (LMGs) and the enemy could now isolate each company and destroy them one by one. The CO took the risk. We positioned LMG nests in the gaps to offset the disadvantage of the large gaps between companies and increased our patrolling activities. By the morning of 10 December, the battalion had extended its defensive perimeter to simulate the defensive layout of a larger force and by 11 December our companies had settled down to their new defended area. However, our casualties were mounting and we were running short of ammunition. We informed the brigade that we needed supplies of food and ammunition and evacuation of our casualties.

Due to attacks by our fighter aircraft, Pakistani artillery fired only at night and in the early hours of the morning. On the morning of 12 December at 0500 hours, Pakistani artillery destroyed the Regimental Aid Post (RAP) bunker that had four of our badly wounded men and all our medical supplies. Nothing was left of the bunker except a big gaping hole. So now, we were also without medical instruments and medicines and nothing was left of the four battle casualties that were in the RAP bunker.

On 12 December, we were apprised that an air drop would take



Air Force pilots and crew standing in front of a Mi-4 helicopter Photo courtesy rediff.com

place over our defended locality and that we should mark a dropping zone (DZ). We marked the DZ with goosenecks and a Caribou transport aircraft appeared about half an hour before dusk. The crew reported that they could see Sylhet on fire due to the smoke and fire caused by the Pakistani artillery. The Caribou dropped ammunition and dry rations but what we wanted was water, fresh rations and small arms ammunition. The Pakistanis did their best to bring down the Caribou and succeeded in causing some damage. Some of the drops fell within the Pakistani defences.

What was more important was the evacuation of our dead and wounded who were lying in the open. Two helicopters arrived at night and took away the dead and wounded. Their evacuation was a big relief and a great morale booster.

The air drop and the helicopter missions at night convinced the Pakistanis that we had been replenished and reinforced. This and the effect of the khukri in the earlier battles reduced their inclination to get into close combat with us and they kept firing at us with their artillery and mortars and machine guns but hesitated to attack.

However, on the night of 12 - 13 December a Pakistani patrol came close to our defended locality and although we drove them away, we felt that they would have seen the gaps in our defences and have concluded that we were not a brigade. The CO and I felt that had we been in their place we would have attacked. Both of us were uncomfortable with the big gaps in our defences and decided to close up as we would be better able to fight in a more coordinated manner. 'A' and 'D' companies were ordered to return to their original defences without breaking contact with the enemy. The companies came back in good order bringing back their wounded and all their equipment.

On the evening of 13 and 14 December, General Sam Manekshaw issued ultimatums to the Pakistanis to surrender or accept the consequences. On the evening of 15 December, Major Mane Malik, the company commander of 'C' Company reported that two Pakistani officers carrying white flags and accompanied by a large number of Pakistani soldiers were approaching his defensive position. The CO told Major Malik to fire an MMG burst close to the group and tell them to go back. The CO did not want the Pakistanis to come close to our defences as they might come to know how thin we were on the ground.

Major Malik did as he was told. The Pakistanis went to ground but the officers wanted to talk. They came a little closer and said they wanted to surrender. The CO who had by now reached 'C' Company told them that he had no orders to accept their surrender and they should go back and continue the fight. The officers then asked to talk with the Brigade Commander.

We now realised that our bluff had worked and that they thought that we were a brigade. The CO said that these were the Brigade Commander's orders and that if they still wished to surrender, they should come later on after we had got clearance from our higher headquarters.

We got in touch with the Brigade Commander and told him what had happened and that he should come to accept the surrender of the Sylhet Garrison. The Brigade Commander came in a helicopter and landed within the battalion defended area. The Pakistan Garrison Commander met Brigadier Quinn at 1500 hours, and the modalities of the surrender were discussed. On 16 December, the Sylhet Garrison surrendered, bringing an end to the battle of Sylhet.

But there were new surprises for everyone. The Pakistanis were surprised to see the Brigade Commander come by



L to R: Late Lt Hawa Singh (A Coy), Vr C; Major Viru Rawat (B Coy); Major Rattan Kaul (D Coy); Late Captain PK Johri, SM (A Coy); Late Major Dinesh Rana (A Coy) (Image: Bharat Rakshak)

helicopter and were astonished to learn from him that he had not been in Sylhet, and that the Gorkha troops holding Sylhet was only half a battalion. The Gorkhas were even more surprised to learn that they had been fighting with two brigades and the Sylhet Garrison. 3 Brigadiers, 173 officers, 290 JCOs and nearly 8000 troops surrendered to Brigadier Quinn and Lieutenant Colonel Harolikar. The three Pakistani Brigadiers were Brigadier Salimullah Khan, Commander 202 Pakistani Infantry Brigade; Brigadier Iftikhar Rana, Commander 313 Pakistani Infantry Brigade and Brigadier SA Hassan, Commander of the Sylhet Garrison.

After the surrender, the Pakistani Garrison Commander was chivalrous to convey to Brigadier Quinn that, 'If this Battalion was not here in Sylhet, we would have held Sylhet for another ten days.'

The troops who surrendered belonged to 31 Punjab, 91 Mujahid Battalion, 12 Azad Kashmir Rifles, 22 Baluch, 30 Frontier Force, 31 Field Regiment, 88 Independent Mortar Battery and troops from the Khyber Rifles, Thal Scouts and Tochi Scouts. Whereas the strength of the Gorkhas had reduced to just 7 officers and 329 other ranks due to casualties.

What came out clearly after the surrender however was that 4/5 Gorkha Rifles (FF) had not only captured and held on to Sylhet against a force twenty times its strength but also tied down two Pakistani brigades and forces of the Sylhet Garrison from 07 to 15 December, thereby hastening the fall of Dhaka. But those nine days in Sylhet extracted a heavy price in 14 killed, including one officer, 2 JCOs and 11 other ranks and 39 wounded.

Lieutenant Colonel Arun Harolikar, the CO was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his outstanding courage and leadership in the battles of Atgram, Gazipur and Sylhet; Flying Officer Satish Chandra Sharma, the ACT Officer, was awarded the Vir Chakra for his courage and impressive control of the air battle over Sylhet. Captain Sengupta the Regimental Medical Officer, Naib Subedar Tirtha Bahadur and Captain Rana were awarded Sena Medals for their brave conduct at the battle of Sylhet. I feel that some of the Company Commanders – Yeshwant Rawat, Dinesh Rana, Virendra Rawat, Mane Malik and the Battery Commander Major KD Segan as well as some JCOs, NCOs and men also ought to have been awarded for their courage and bravery in these three battles. Considering the valour of the unit in the difficult missions that it was put through and the trust reposed in it by senior commanders repeatedly, it was fair to expect a greater share of awards.

The success of the Gorkhas was tempered by the loss of many of their officers and men, who were not around to savour this moment of victory of the Indian Armed Forces in which they had undoubtedly played a memorable part. Much of the credit in facilitating the Gorkha capture of Sylhet and to hold on to it, needs to be given to the IAF who supported us in every possible way. We also acknowledge the part played by BBC in facilitating their success. It was a historic error by a media house known for its authentic reporting, that helped the Gorkhas to turn the tables on a far superior force.



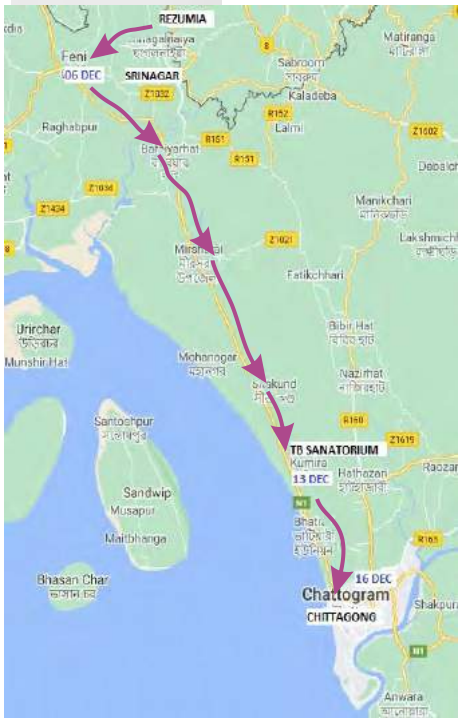
Major General Ian Cardozo, *AVSM, SM (Retd) is the first war-disabled officer of the Indian Army (an amputee due to a mine blast in the 1971 War) to command a battalion and a brigade. A graduate from NDA, he was commissioned and later commanded 1/5 GR (FF). During the 1965 and 1971 wars, he served with 4/ 5 GR (FF). Despite his war injury, he maintained his physical fitness levels and beat a number of able-bodied officers in battle physical fitness tests. Post retirement, he has served as the Chairman of Rehabilitation Council of India from 2005 to 2011. He is also a marathon runner, and regularly takes part in the Mumbai Marathon with his prosthetic limb. The General is married to Priscilla and has three sons.*



Residents of Feni greeting Gen Aurora on 6th December



Lt Gen Sagat Singh briefing Brig Anand Sarup



'Operations of KILO Force', map source Google

FROM FENI TO CHITTAGONG

Chittagong was the second major city in East Pakistan and its main port, but was on a limb on the Eastern Coastline. An adhoc force called the Kilo Force, was tasked to move towards Chittagong, a distance of about 100 kms from the border. The Force achieved remarkable success and the Chittagong garrison commander surrendered on 16th December.

Prologue

I was a bit disappointed when in June 1971, I was posted on promotion from Staff College to take over the Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS); and not to command a brigade. However, as events proved later, this very 'disappointing' posting took me into active combat. When I joined the School, trouble was already brewing in East Pakistan and an armed conflict was in sight. Refugees were streaming into India in hordes causing economic, social and security problems.

At the CIJWS, infantry battalions were no longer available for training and counter insurgency having been relegated to a back seat, the school was temporarily closed down. After a few weeks of the closing down of the school, I was called in to help at Command Headquarters with planning for future operations, standing by for those going on emergency leave from operational duties and so on. My employment on such duties, proved to be a blessing in disguise because it exposed me to the terrain on which I was to operate later. It was also an opportunity to interact with Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Mukti Bahini who were to form part of the Force I was to lead into action. It was as if I was being readied for the challenge ahead.

KILO Force

By the end of 1971 the situation had heated up and in mid-November I was told to report at Agartala on 15th November to take over command of an ad-hoc Force and receive orders from Headquarters 4 Corps, under whose command this formation, to be known as KILO Force, was to operate.
KILO Force was "as diverse as it could be", rigged up in a hurry and never trained together as a composite force under one leader. To be handed over such a Force at the last minute before battle and then having to lead it into action almost immediately thereafter, would be a challenge for any commander. In retrospect, I realise that "It was a Force nonetheless and one that rose to the occasion!"

This 'diverse' Force consisted of a Force Headquarters with a Brigade Major (BM) and DAA& QMG (posted by Army HQ at the last minute) while other Headquarters personnel (also essential equipment) were picked up from CIJWS. The units under command were 31 JAT, 32 MAHAR less one company (both 'I' Battalions[1] , hence without 81 mm Mortars, Machine Guns and Recoilless Guns), one battalion BSF, one battalion CRPF and two battalions BDR, one regiment Artillery less two batteries i.e. six guns 75 x 24 inch only and 14 x 3.7 inch Howitzers i.e. two Post Groups of BSF and "Mujib" Battery of Bangladesh forces. The support elements were rather thin. All these elements were organised to fight insurgency or for deployment on security of BOPs. 3.7 inch guns had limited range and 75 x 24 was meagre in blast effect.

Prior to the outbreak of war KILO Force was to occupy defences in own territory, ensure security of Border Outposts over a longish border, contain the enemy in certain areas and be ready for the subsequent capture of Feni. In addition, in an early phase of the war, this Force was required to pose a threat to Feni which, as it turned out later, was captured very early in this phase. General Officer Commanding (GOC) IV corps was fully cognizant of the shortcomings of KILO force and had therefore planned its advance to Chittagong in conjunction with 83 Infantry Brigade, when the latter became available. As events unfolded, the speedy progress of operations prompted the GOC to allow the Force to start the advance to Chittagong by itself earlier than originally planned - and without waiting for the designated brigade.

[1] The 'Thirty-series' or 'I' Battalions were a short lived phenomenon of the late 1960s. 31 JAT is now 12 JAT. 32 MAHAR is now 15 MAHAR.



Brigadier Anand Sarup with BSF and CRPF Officers

Integration of Troops and Forward Presence

On taking over command of this Force, my primary challenge was to integrate the diverse elements into cohesive units, make them responsive in battle and organize the Force appropriately for the task ahead. With different organisations and varying capability of units, I would have to be selective in their utilization and also ensure that the Commanding Officers (CO) did not have to look over their shoulders.

Fortunately from my earlier days, I had known the COs of both 'I' Battalions, the Artillery Regimental Commander and the DAA and QMG, a span that would be adequate under the circumstances. Additionally, I integrated part of the Mukti Bahini available, with 31 JAT and 32 MAHAR, the two 'I' Battalions, down to section level, ensuring that not less than six men in each section were from the concerned battalions. I was thus able to bring these two units up to strength and also make up the fourth rifle company of 32 MAHAR. I also felt the factor of unit IZZAT would get boosted when under stress.

I also appreciated that since the situation was going to be fluid, I would have to be well forward for giving directions, without breathing down the necks of the forward units all the time. So, after the initial verbal/written orders, I would meet the COs at their unit locations leaving Jagan Wadhwa, the BM to hold the fort at Force Headquarters - a task that he performed with professional efficiency.

In this effort to remain forward, I was in the thick of battle on a number of occasions. On one such occasion, a company of 31 JAT in defence in Area Srinagar reported shelling and tank noises. Being part of an 'I' Battalion, the unit had no anti-tank weapons, much less the training in recognizing tank noises! In this situation, I moved to the company with the CO; we found that though the scare of tanks had gone, shelling remained persistent because apparently the enemy wanted to fire all the ammunition at his present gun position before abandoning it. In the meantime one of the two RCL guns with the force also arrived to be deployed. On another occasion I reached 31 JAT to find that the CO was in one of his companies. While explaining the plan to Major Kumar, the Adjutant, a mortar bomb landed nearby. Perhaps it was one of the enemy's stay-behind Observation Posts who was directing this fire. The second bomb fell no more than five yards away, the brunt of which was borne by Kumar, who had gone to the ground. His left arm was severed at the shoulder and one leg from the thigh on the same side.

He was carried to the Regimental Aid Post but succumbed to the injuries on the

way to the Hospital. I was unscathed but my clothes were smeared with blood shed by gallant Major Kumar who gave his life while virtually becoming a shield for my safety.

Feni

The first attack was launched by KILO Force (32 MAHAR) on Night 05/06 December and there were indications that the enemy was withdrawing. I decided to follow up aggressively, which resulted in the capture of Rezumia Bridge over the Muhari River intact before it could be blown up by the enemy. All explosive charges had been laid and the bridge was ready for demolition. It was an operation led by a brave young officer of the battalion. Aggressively following-up the withdrawing enemy, 31 JAT captured Feni by the morning of 06 December. This was the first important town captured in the whole campaign as it cut off Chittagong from the rest of East Pakistan. The Southern flank of IV Corps was now secure. The same morning, the Army Commander and Corps Commander flew into Feni to attend a reception by the local citizens.

To Chittagong

To maintain the momentum of aggressive action we commenced our advance towards Chittagong on 9 December. Two roads led to Chittagong, both separated by a thickly wooded ridge, both parallel to the coast line and separated by varying distances. The one nearer the coast line was more important. 31 JAT and 32 MAHAR with KILO Force Headquarters moved along the Western (closer to the coast line) road and 4 BDR battalion advanced on the other (subsidiary) axis. There were some delaying actions by the enemy.

On night 12/13 December, the Force was involved in a major operation at Kumira, where 31 JAT had contacted the main opposition. The enemy had two companies entrenched in his main defences. By now it was established that the enemy was sensitive to any outflanking move. To exploit this weakness 31 JAT sent a company along the ridge line during the night, which reached TB Sanatorium overlooking the enemy defences from the East. It achieved complete surprise as the enemy was found to have only a few administrative personnel at this Sanatorium. With TB Sanatorium lost, the enemy brought in reinforcements to recapture it, but his attack was repulsed. By the evening of 13 December, the troops at TB Sanatorium were reinforced by another company of 31 JAT. One brave young Pakistani Artillery officer holed up in a temple continued to bring down fire till he was killed by a direct hit from a Rocket Launcher. I moved to the Sanatorium on Night 13/14 December next to the Headquarters of 31 JAT. It turned out to be a disturbed night because the enemy tried to retake this dominating position even though in a feeble effort.

In this action the enemy suffered 50 dead including an officer of 24 FF Regiment and the brave gunner officer while five were taken prisoner. Among the weapons captured were two 3-inch mortars and three Medium Machine Guns. 31 JAT were well led and had fought a splendid action for 48 hours. Three of their officers were wounded in this action.

Surrender by the Enemy and Breakup of KILO Force

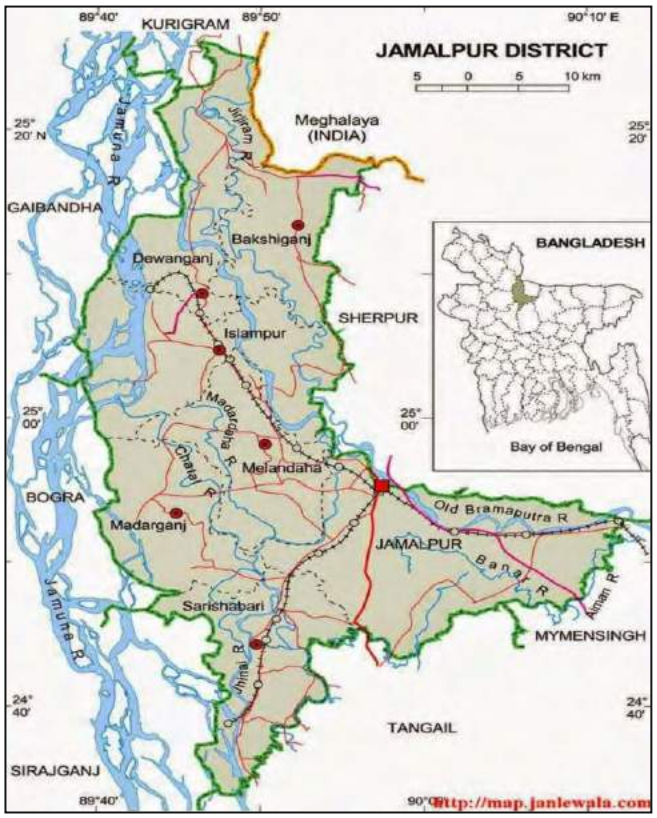
Brig Taskin Ud - Din reported to Headquarters KILO Force in the evening of 16 December to work out modalities for the surrender. Six days later, on 22 December, KILO Force was broken up as quickly as it was put together. The BM and DAA & QMG were left to wind up. Headquarters of the Force and I went back to CIJWS, 'I' Battalions went back to MIZORAM chasing hostile Mizos escaping through Chittagong hill tracts and resume their counter insurgency duties and BDR and Mukti Bahini became Bangladesh's national assets. After a while, I got my posting order to a Brigade in Roorkee.

An Aside

When entering Chittagong, with my GSO 3 in a jeep, I recounted to the latter how pretty girls in Paris were kissing the liberators of the city during World War II. At about this time, the jeep was hailed to a stop by an old Bangladeshi with a scruffy beard. He mounted the step of the jeep and kissed me hard; but with tears in his eyes - tears of joy! The GSO 3 was quick off the mark to quip, "Sir, this one was with a difference!" Basic emotions were, however, the same.



Lieutenant General ANAND SARUP, *PVSM, MVC, was commissioned into 8th Gorkha Rifles in December 1949. As a young officer, he attended three courses back to back in US Army Schools ie Rangers, Special Forces (Honour Graduate) and Jungle Warfare in 1961. In 1965-66, Anand Sarup graduated from the Command and Staff College in USA. He commanded both the battalions he served in during the early years of his career, one in Sikkim and the other in Sela. He was awarded the MAHAVIR CHAKRA for his command of KILO Force in the 1971 War. He went on to command an Infantry Brigade, a Division and a Strike Corps. He has also served on the Faculty of DSSC and is an Alumnus of National Defence College. After a short stint as DG Infantry, he assumed the appointment of Master General Ordnance and finally took charge as Deputy Chief of Army Staff. Lieutenant General Anand Sarup retired to Dehradun in 1987 after 38 professionally fruitful and happy years.*



Map showing the Areas of Bakshiganj, Jamalpur and Mymensingh

JANGIS (1 MARATHA LI) LEAD THE NORTHERN THRUST

As the 2, 33 and 4 Corps battled their way through Pakistani defences to the West, Northwest and East of Dhaka, 101 Communication Zone troops broke through from the North along the Tura-Bakshiganj-Jamalpur-Tangail axis, and entered Dhaka on 16th December. The Jangi Paltan led the way from the North.

"Sir, where should we deploy our battalion?" asked young 2nd Lieutenant Basant K Ponwar (later Brigadier BK Ponwar presently IG Commando Training School, Chhattisgarh Police) of the Jangi Paltan when the Jangis marched into Dhaka on the 16th of December 1971. Brig Hardev Singh Kler, Commander 95 Infantry Brigade replied, *"Go stay in the Palace of General Yahya Khan, the Dictator of Pakistan and the tormentor of the then East Pakistan"*. It was a proud moment for the Jangi's Tiger, affectionately addressed by his friends as "Bul Bul Brar" (he later rose to become the Eastern Army Commander) and the young officers who were part of a great and unparalleled victory. They and 2 PARA had the unique honour of being the first Indian troops to enter Dhaka. And the icing on the cake was the opportunity to stay in the palace of Yahya Khan, even if for a couple of nights - the feeling was simply amazing. The Jangi Paltan made history and every Jangi felt his chest swell with pride when they heard the surrender speech of the Pakistani Commander on 16 December 1971 while sitting inside this palatial house in Dhaka.

In the spirit of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the Jangi Paltan, the First Battalion of the Maratha Light Infantry (MARATHA LI) Regiment preserved the honour of the regiment and the country by comprehensively defeating the enemy at Jamalpur and leading the Northern thrust into Dhaka. After crossing the International Border in the Central Sector along the Bakshiganj – Jamalpur – Tangail – Dhaka axis, the Jangis fought valiantly at Bakshiganj and Jamalpur. For their exceptional victory at Jamalpur, the Jangi Paltan was awarded the Battle Honour Jamalpur.

Battle of Bakshiganj

The Jangi Paltan crossed the International Border on the night of 03/04 December heading towards Bakshiganj in the Jamalpur – Mymensingh Sector. The forces deployed in the sector were Pakistan's 93 Infantry Brigade less a Battalion. 31 BALUCH with at least four Para Military Companies was deployed in and around Jamalpur and Bakshiganj. When 1 MARATHA LI was a kilometre short of Bakshiganj, Delta Company led by Major Sachdeva laid an ambush on the Sherpur – Bakshiganj Road to prevent reinforcements to Bakshiganj. Fearing encirclement by the Jangis, the enemy attacked the Delta Company ambush location with two companies. Under Major Sachdeva's inspired leadership, Delta Company beat back the attack inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and forcing them to withdraw. By mid-day the enemy realised the futility of continuing the attack on a staunch Jangi defence and withdrew into Bakshiganj fortress, leaving behind 18 dead including the enemy Company Commander. Delta Company lost one Jawan during the battle. In the ensuing night, strong patrols were sent to Bakshiganj and noting a marked

weakening in enemy resistance, two companies launched a quick attack from the rear and by first light on 05 December 1971, Bakshiganj was captured.

The Real Test at Jamalpur

The Indian Army's strategy was to bypass the strongly held fortresses adopted by the Pakistani Forces and strike into the depth areas. The ultimate aim was to capture Dhaka. After the capture of Bakshiganj, Brigadier HS Kler asked 1 MARATHA LI to infiltrate from the West of Jamalpur, crossing a tributary of the Brahmaputra River on fishing boats. The battalion had very limited mobility means therefore it exploited the resources available locally and marshaled a hundred bullock carts to carry mortars, ammunition, fighting stores, supplies and rations. Bullock cart columns carrying the light battery and battalion mortars were left at the river crossing, however, the Artillery Observation Post officers moved with the battalion, which had commenced its advance on the night of 5th/6th December 71. A firm base was established in area Bhapki three kilometres South-West of Jamalpur by 1300 hours on 6th December and the battalion moved five and a half kilometres South of Jamalpur. The Jamalpur garrison by this time had entire 31 Baluch and four companies of para military forces and was strongly defended.

Brigadier Hardev Singh Kler tried to play a psychological game with the Jamalpur Fortress commander to force him to surrender without a fight. Through a Mukti Bahini courier he sent a note across to Commanding Officer (CO) 31 Baluch. The note read, *"You have been surrounded from all directions by the brigade and we have 30 air sorties available in support. In the interest of the safety of your troops if you surrender to us we will spare your life".* CO 31 Baluch promptly replied back, *"Dear Brigadier, we are waiting for the battle of Jamalpur Fortress to begin. Let's not waste our time and next time when I see you, I would like to see you with a Sten gun in your hand and not pen with which you seem to be an expert."* Indeed a brave reply by an enemy commander in the face of a difficult situation.



(Upper) Enemy troops surrendering to the Jangi Paltan at Jamalpur. (Lower left) Heroic Welcome in Dhaka. (Lower right) Sam Manekshaw talking to a Jangi Paltan soldier.

Col KS Brar, CO 1 MARATHA LI surmised that an intense battle lay ahead of them to capture Jamalpur. The Jangis steeled themselves and every Officer, JCO and Jawan was bubbling with excitement to join the battle and decimate the enemy. On the night of 9/10 Dec, the leading rifle companies of Jangi Paltan closed in to within a kilometer of the Jamalpur defences. The Jamalpur defences were strongly organised with a series of bunkers on ring bunds prepared around Jamalpur. In addition, there were numerous pill boxes prepared by the enemy on roof tops. Realising the strength of enemy defences, Brigadier HS Kler inducted additional battalions, and 13 GUARDS passed through the Jangi Paltan and established a road block to the South East of Jamalpur. In addition, 13 RAJPUTANA RIFLES crossed the river and deployed with guns and mortars at the crossing site. Since the thrust from the North was getting delayed, the Army Commander insisted on reducing the Jamalpur garrison at the earliest.

The plan entailed the Jangi Paltan launching the first phase and securing a foothold on the defences located along the periphery of Jamalpur. Subsequently the other two battalions would expand and capture Jamalpur. However on the night of 10th/11th December 71, the enemy started registering positions where Indian Army troops were deployed around Jamalpur especially the positions held by 1 MARATHA LI. Also, a Pakistani radio intercept indicated that 31 Baluch was to break through the road blocks established around Jamalpur and fallback to Dhaka for its defence. This was a golden opportunity which Brigadier Hardev Kler seized - he decided to destroy the enemy while attempting to break through the road blocks. The plans were quickly revised to hold the road blocks in strength. Jangi Paltan deployed two companies on either flank of the Jamalpur - Tangail axis. The enemy would have to fight through the valiant Marhattas to reach Dhaka.

Seeing the noose closing in on Jamalpur, the enemy reacted like a cornered cat and at 1250 hours on 10 December 71 launched successive assaults in an attempt to break out of the garrison. The Pakistanis tried the Chinese

human wave tactics, with the skies reverberating with war cries of Pakistan Zindabad and Allah o Akbar. Five assaults were launched till 2 am on 11 December. But the wiry Marhattas beat back every assault in the true spirit of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Lieutenant Ponwar opines that taking part in close combat and a hand to hand fight with the Pakistanis and beating back five assaults was a testimony of the valour, fortitude and resilience of the Marhatta warrior. Seeing the desperate enemy trying to break through the road block in vehicles, Lieutenant Rajinder Dafle manning the 57 mm Recoilless gun requested for illumination fires from the artillery and blasted many vehicles, thus forcing the enemy to abandon its attempt to breakout by vehicles. When Lieutenant Rajinder fired at a loaded ammunition vehicle the entire sky was lit up and was a sight to remember. At daybreak, the battlefield was littered with the mortal remains of Pakistani soldiers. Young Ponwar heard voices from the Pakistani side asking him to organise a meeting with Bulbul Brar, the Jangi Paltan CO, to which he in his young exuberant way replied *"Pahle hamse to mil lo phir CO saheb se milna."* A meeting was later organised and the enemy surrendered. 31 Baluch and attached troops had suffered 234 killed and 20 injured. A total of three officers, 10 JCOs and 372 ORs surrendered. The Jangi Paltan had 10 soldiers killed in action and eight soldiers were injured. **The victory at Jamalpur had strategic value as it opened the Northern route to Dhaka, as reflected in the All India Radio broadcast following the battle which announced that, "After a night long battle by outwitting and out manoeuvring the enemy, the Jamalpur town has fallen to the Indian Armed Forces and the Northern Gates to Dhaka are open."**

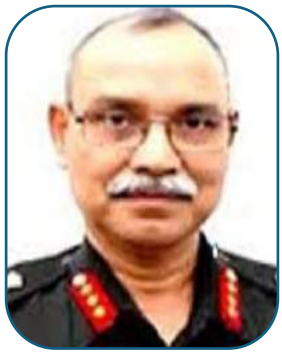
The Indian Army Enters Dhaka

The Battle at Jamalpur was amongst the bloodiest and grimiest of the campaign and put the Pakistani 93 Brigade into complete disarray. After the capture of Jamalpur, the advance to Dhaka resumed on 12 December 1971. The leading troops moved through Madhupur and Ghatial, which had no enemy presence. In the words of Tiger Siddiqui, the Mukti Bahini Commander at the outskirts of Tangail, *"Dushman dar ke mare bhag gaya."* A historic link-up with 2 PARA (erstwhile 3 MARATHA LI) was affected at the crossing over the Poongli Bridge at Tangail on the evening of 12 December. The sight of 2 PARA dropping from the skies was so unnerving that the enemy troops guarding the Poongli Bridge just ran away. The Mukti Bahini fighters had passed on to the enemy that over 5000 Indian Army personnel are dropping from the skies. This psychological pressure proved very effective and the march upto Dhaka was devoid of any opposition.

On 16 December 1971, when the paltan entered Dhaka, it was a mesmerising sight. The streets were full of people, with joy and happiness writ large on their faces as they welcomed the Indian Army and shouted slogans such as, *"Apna Neta Tumra Neta Sheikh Mujib,"* and *"Indian Army Zindabad."* It was a historic day in the history of the Jangi Paltan. And the unit was appropriately honoured with the Battle Honour Jamalpur and five Vir Chakras, besides other awards. Colonel KS Brar, CO, Major SC Nambiar, Captain Rajinder Dafle, Havildar Krishna Gurao and Havildar Laxman Rane (Posthumous) were the Vir Chakra receipients.

Conclusion

Victory in war is always a joint effort of the Armed Forces including other civilian organisations of the country. But the leadership at the cutting edge holds the key to victory. Highly motivated, valiant, and innovative leadership has been traditionally present in abundance in the Indian Army. The 1971 war was a combined effort of the various organs of the Indian Government, Indian Defence Forces, Mukti Bahini fighters of Bangladesh and superlative strategic leadership especially that of Field Marshal Manekshaw, a soldier who had no parallels in strategic thinking, courage of conviction, impeccable moral fibre, and bravery of the highest order. The nation will remain ever grateful to this legend of a Soldier's General along with the likes of Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, the operational level architect of the victory in Bangladesh as GOC 4 Corps. Along with them were the cutting edge tactical level leaders from officers to jawans but for whom this victory would have eluded us.



Lieutenant General Dushyant Singh, *PVSM, AVSM (Retd) was commissioned into 9 MARATHA LI in December 1981. He is an alumnus of NDC, DSSC, CDM and Naval Post Graduate School, California, USA. He has attended the Regional Defence Counter Terrorism Programme with specialization in Terrorist Operations and Financing in US. Besides his service in varied operational areas, he has been an instructor of Human Resource Development in College of Defence Management, Secunderabad and also commanded the Army War College at Mhow. The General Officer has commanded an Infantry Battalion, Brigade and a Division in Jammu and Kashmir. He also holds the distinction of having served twice in the elite National Security Guards. He contributes regularly in various defence journals and newspapers, has written chapters in two books namely, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism (chapter on Deterring Terrorism)" and "Countering Terrorism: Psychological Strategies (Chapter on Impact of Virtual world in Creation and Sustenance of Terrorism)". He also has a website dushyantspeaks.com*



Waves of Dakotas and Para Troopers floating down at Tangail.

THE TANGAIL 'TRUMP CARD'

Indian Army's Airborne Assault Of 1971

As the Indian Army moved deeper into East Pakistan (EP), it was decided to speed up the operations exponentially and the planned airborne operation was given the Go Ahead. A first hand narration of the first airborne operation in war by the Indian Army follows.

As a young Captain in 2 Parachute Battalion (2 PARA), I was fortunate to be a part of momentous events of the 1971 War. Rightly referred to as the 'Trump Card' by General Palit in his famous book titled *'The Lightning Campaign'*, our unit made history by carrying out the Indian Army's first, post-independence airborne assault in enemy territory. The operation took place on 11 December 1971 at Tangail, then EP and the subsequent achievements of the battalion are now etched in the history of the creation of Bangladesh.

The 50 Independent Parachute Brigade was deployed in West Bengal, with its headquarters at Howrah to conduct anti-Naxal operations. In November 1971, when war with Pakistan was imminent, 2 PARA, as a part of 50 Independent Parachute Brigade, was stationed in the Botanical Gardens, Kolkata. The battalion was earmarked to carry out an airborne operation, its tasking was to be calibrated with the progress of battle, and we had to prepare for several contingencies.

The air transport lift capability of the Indian Air Force (IAF) at that time was limited to a battalion group making it a precious resource to be used judiciously. We had a varied aircraft inventory of twenty-two C-47 Dakotas, six AN-12s, twenty C119 Fairchild Packets and two Caribou. Each type of aircraft had different cruising

speeds and their flight paths had to be coordinated precisely to reach the designated rendezvous (RV) mid-air as per the given schedule. This was an essential pre-requisite and a key aspect of the operation to successfully approach the Dropping Zone (DZ) in the desired tactical formation and maintain the sequence of the para drop. In simple terms, the first task for us was akin to various families of musical instruments playing in-sync, on note, at an orchestra. Only here, the stakes were much higher (literally and figuratively!) and there was no *maestro* conducting the performance on site. The necessity of two mounting airfields made the task only more difficult.

Preparation

Our battalion group included 49 Para Field Battery of 17 Para Field Regiment, a platoon of 411 Para Field Company, Detachment Brigade Signal Company, Advance Dressing Station (ADS) and Surgical Team 60 Para Medical Company and Ground Liaison Section. As the Adjutant, my hands were more than full. Our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel KS Pannu oversaw the equipment and drills of the pathfinders, the RV drills, preparation of heavy / supply loads and flight manifests, functioning of equipment etc. We also coordinated with the Ordnance Depot for foolproof preparation of heavy dropping platforms for the transport vehicles and artillery guns.

In the meantime, the Brigade HQ had infiltrated Captain Ghosh of Para Brigade Signal Company to establish contact with Qader Siddiqui, the commander of Mukti Bahini guerrillas in the *Tangail* sector. Captain Ghosh, later awarded a Vir Chakra, was tasked with preparing the ground to receive an airborne operation in his sector. The exact date, location and time of the Para-drop was however kept confidential. The requirement to ensure complete secrecy of the operation necessitated us having to seal the Botanical Gardens restricting public access, and naturally, the officials of the Botanical Gardens protested. Dr Moitra, then Director of the Botanical Gardens, unhappy with this, escalated the matter to higher authorities in vain.

On the night of 9 December 1971, we inconspicuously moved out of the Botanical Gardens to our designated mounting areas. The operation was covert, and such was the level of secrecy that nobody suspected the heavy movement of assorted vehicles out of the Gardens. Dr Moitra would have heaved a sigh of relief the next morning. However, it would be remiss if we fail to mention that after the war was over, Dr Moitra kindly wrote to us, sharing how proud he was having been associated with us. We reciprocated the gesture.

Countdown

Kalaikunda, at about 160 kms was the mounting base for our 'main personnel' drop. The IAF had amassed a nearly complete transport aircraft fleet for this operation. A majority were Dakotas, grandly lined up at Kalaikunda airfield for the personnel drop. The rest were situated at the Dum Dum Airport (which had since been closed to civil traffic) for heavy and supply drops. The Battalion Group comprised of approximately 1,000 personnel. In addition, AN-12 aircraft dropped about 103 tons of ammunition and stores. To ensure complete success of the operation, a Caribou aircraft undertook a dummy drop for deception.

It is worthwhile to highlight the loads each individual carried. Besides digging tools, personal arms and the first line scale of ammunition, every man carried two grenades, a blanket or a ground sheet, a raincape, a pair of trousers, a pair of socks and four days' worth of cooked rations. Each soldier also carried half a belt of medium machine gun ammunition or an anti-tank rocket or 2" mortar ammunition, since soldiers armed with these weapons could not have carried the entire ammunition by themselves. This ammunition was immediately required on landing, hence had to be carried by the soldiers themselves, rather than being dropped as door loads or supply drop loads. The weight carried by each soldier was thus around 37 kg, including the weight of personal weapons, parachute and the weight of PAE bags for those who jumped with them.

The mounting bases were sealed and we received our final orders on 10 December 1971. The Battalion Group was to launch an airborne assault to capture *Poongli Bridge* and the adjacent ferry on the river *Loha Jung* near *Tangail*, approximately 112 kms Northwest of *Dhaka*. The plan was to block the withdrawal of enemy troops from Jamalpur and Mymensingh, who were to fall back to Dhaka for its defence.

Action Station

11 December saw hectic air activity at the Dum Dum and Kalaikunda Airports. The Air Task Force was commanded by Group Commander Gurdip Singh. The Packets and the AN-12s arrived and were parked in their parking bays. In addition, there were the fighter squadrons, executing bombing sorties over EP. Our air armada consisted of a total of fifty-four aircraft including the Caribou, Dakota, Packet and AN-12s accompanied by fighter cover. Initially, the drop was planned for nightfall, but since the IAF had achieved complete air domination, the timing of the drop was advanced by two hours, from 1830 hours to 1630 hours, to take advantage of good flying conditions for such a large air formation.

The Battalion Group took off from Dum Dum and Kalaikunda Airfields on 11 December 1971 at 1423 hours preceded by the pathfinders who took off earlier from Dum Dum. The pathfinders led by Captain TC Bhardwaj took off in two aircraft and were dropped at 1540 hours on the planned DZ. This drop was widespread, up to over four kms. After a quick RV, the pathfinders marked the DZ and were ready to receive the main drop by 1600 hours that evening. The AN 12s which were faster and carrying supplies took off, followed by the Packets carrying heavy dropping loads and the last were the Dakotas carrying us paratroopers from



Lt Col K S Pannu (Driving) with others enters Tangail - 12 Dec 71

Kalaikunda. The IAF was flying us in waves of three aircraft. *Showtime! Time for the drop - the red light came on, the doors opened.*

At the green light and the shrill sound of the bell, the despatch began. The violent gust of wind hit me. My parachute had opened perfectly, and I was all too familiar with the feeling of floating down, minutes away from touching down – a rehearsed and well-acquainted motion for any paratrooper. Only, this was not a mere drill! After releasing the weapon container, I looked around. Our parachutes adorned the sky and our aircraft were flying wave after wave, dropping paratroopers. Scenes of the D-Day drop in the film 'The Longest Day' briefly came to mind, replaced almost instantly by the realisation that this was war and not cinema. We saw a few people coming out of the houses to see the drifting parachutes. I landed in a corner of the village and after releasing the harness, took out my weapon and took position. The Dakotas were still flying high and parachutes took the place of stars that normally light up the sky. This sent chills down the enemy spine who assumed the Para-drop to be much larger in size – a misconception that certainly worked to our advantage.

'Joi Bangla' and the Usher of Unexpected Helping Hands

The DZ was in an area surrounded by villages. Seeing the parachutes coming down, the villagers ran in panic, trying to flee the area. One of our NCOs shouted *'Joi Bangla'* and a couple of other soldiers nearby repeated the chant. The civilians, who a moment earlier had been running away suddenly became joyous and ran back to the DZ. Looking back, that one chant garnered the airborne group a thousand helping hands, eager to carry loads, act as guides or fetch water. *Albeit*, well intentioned, their presence later became a hindrance as the villagers refused to leave, even when actual fighting commenced! Decades later, on an invitation from the Government of Bangladesh, I visited the same battlefield in 2012. Full of nostalgia, I was touched by the warmth of locals, many of them having witnessed the historic Para-drop of 11 December 1971.

Battle of Poongli Bridge and Link up

The battalion assembled and moved quickly towards the *Poongli* Bridge. A Pakistani brigade was retreating from *Jamalpur* and we had to capture the bridge and cut off its route of withdrawal. After capturing the bridge, we hurriedly dug in. What horrified us was the corpses of a few women found in the bunkers, probably killed by Pakistani soldiers as we attacked the bridge. About two hours later, 'stand to' was ordered as an enemy vehicular column was coming our way, down the road to *Tangail*. The vehicles had their headlights glaring, obviously unaware of our ambush ahead. We opened fire at around 2030 hours. The RPG-7 fired by Paratrooper Vaijnath Singhe 'hit' the first vehicle which went up in flames. Our artillery and machine guns opened fire. The enemy transport column came to a grinding halt. The battle raged on, with shells lobbed into and around the convoy. More vehicles had caught fire and we could hear the enemy regrouping; orders being shouted to charge into our positions. Close quarter battle ensued with a lot of shouting amidst the deafening sounds of gunfire. Then, about two hours later, everything quietened – the eerie sound of silence.

Next morning, we became aware that about a battalion strength of the enemy had run into our ambush. Seeing the burnt vehicles with charred bodies, we realized that over 160 enemy soldiers had been killed and about 30 made prisoners.

Around 1130 hours, we spotted movement of a large group of enemy soldiers in the tall grass in front of our position. IAF pilots were eagerly waiting to join our fight and were ably guided by Captain Thangkima, the Ground Liaison Officer. Two MiG-19 fighters appeared in the sky, dived and strafed the ground with their heavy machine guns. Never had I heard such a deafening noise. The line of bullets making their impact on the ground was clearly visible. Just as they had suddenly appeared, the MiGs disappeared. We saw no enemy movement in front of our positions after that. Early afternoon, Major General Nagra, General Officer Commanding 101 Communication Zone, and Brigadier Kler, the linking brigade commander arrived in a helicopter to meet us and landed in the defensive area secured by us. It was wonderful to know that the linking troops were not too far away.

Around 1700 hours, vehicles of 1 Maratha Light Infantry of 95 Infantry Brigade linked up with us, exactly 24 hours after the Para-drop. A great feat indeed! It was a momentous military 'milan' (meeting) of two Maratha Battalions, since 2 PARA was the erstwhile 3 Maratha Light Infantry. That evening, the locals informed us that the civil administration at *Tangail* had departed. Colonel Pannu then sent a detachment to occupy the district headquarters.

Doors of Dhaka

After 13 December 1971, as the battle progressed, the Indian Army met with increasingly stiff resistance enroute to Dhaka. On 14 & 15 December 1971, we moved on an alternate axis and surprised the enemy by knocking at the doors of Dhaka at *Mirpur* at midnight.

Early morning 16 December 1971, Major General GS Nagra, landed at the battalion headquarters and informed us that the Pakistan Army had agreed to surrender, and a message was to be sent to Lieutenant General AAK Niazi of the Pakistan Army. Our last encounter with the enemy had just gotten over, and we too had suffered casualties. The enemy was on the other side of *Mirpur Bridge* and infrequent exchange of fire was ongoing. I, along with Captain Hitesh Mehta, the aide to the GOC got into a jeep with a handwritten message from General Nagra to General Niazi. It read:

"My dear Abdullah, the game is up, I suggest you give yourself up to me and I will take care of you."

Given the significance of this message, although rife with danger, it was to be delivered in person. Near the *Mirpur Bridge,* Major JS Sethi, the forward locality Company Commander, jumped into my jeep and so did Lieutenant Tejender Singh, the young Engineer Platoon Commander of 411 Para Field Company. Oblivious to the impending danger, we were excited at the thought of moving into Dhaka with the message of surrender and thus making history!

Little did we know that the Pakistan Army on the other side was completely unaware and had received no orders to surrender. They opened fire as we crossed the bridge. We stopped and I shouted across telling them to stop firing. The firing stopped, but they surrounded us and we were disarmed. It was a tense and a very tricky situation. I engaged with the Pakistani JCO in-charge in a bid to gain time. I told him to call a senior officer and threatened him with dire consequences if any harm came to us. I told him that the Indian Army had surrounded Dhaka and their General had agreed to surrender. Luckily, a Captain arrived on the scene and he took us to the Commandant of the Garrison, who in turn took the letter and asked us to wait.

An hour later, Major General Jamshed, GOC of the Dhaka Garrison, arrived and I drove him in my jeep to our location across the *Mirpur Bridge.* General Jamshed, dressed in khaki, was seated between Major Sethi and me. There was another Pakistani jeep behind us. As we approached the bridge, we were fired upon again, neither side knowing our identity! In the firing, Major Sethi received an MMG burst on his left leg. Another bullet hit the helmet of Lieutenant Tejender Singh right in the middle, deflected inside, grazing past his hair and came out from the other side. He still preserves that helmet. The situation was restored soon, and we reached our location. General Nagra arrived shortly thereafter along with Colonel Pannu and General Jamshed surrendered his pistol to General Nagra.

At about 1000 hours we embarked in transport consisting of a few jeeps and buses requisitioned by the Mukti Bahini and moved into Dhaka. After many days in the field, we looked like a mangy lot. Driving through the Pakistani defences, some Baluch Regiment soldiers came out of their trenches and raised their weapons in a final show of defiance, but no untoward incident took place. We entered Dhaka and drove past Hotel Intercontinental where white flags of the United Nations proclaiming the hotel to be a 'No Combat Zone' fluttered merrily. All around were soldiers of the Pakistan Army with their weapons, depressed with the turn of events. The Pakistani military police guided our convoy to the Race Course in the Dhaka Cantonment. Colonel Pannu along with Tiger Siddiqui and a few of us headed straight to HQ Pakistan Eastern Command.

Walking into the office of General Niazi, we found him distraught, teary eyed. He lamented and said, *"Pindi main baithe haramzaadon ne marwa diya"* (a line self-explanatory, which needs no translation). In contrast, the Stick Orderly outside his office stood upright as a soldier. That same evening, the leading elements of IV Corps entered Dhaka and the capital was placed under the command of Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, another paratrooper.

A new nation had been born and we had the honour to be among the first men to walk in the liberated capital. The Surrender Ceremony took place at 1600 hours on 16 December 1971. General AAK Niazi signed the Instrument of Surrender on the dotted line. He handed over his pistol to General Jagjit Singh Aurora, the victorious commander of India's Eastern Army. He too, was a paratrooper, having commanded 1 PARA. The surrender meant that the whole Pakistani Army and the civilian administration totaling about 93,000 persons became our prisoners. This was the biggest surrender in history after World War II.

Victories & Vagaries of War

Major JS Sethi was evacuated to the Military Hospital at Dhaka where he was operated upon by a Pakistani surgeon on 16 December 1971 itself! His leg unfortunately had to be amputated. It was indeed an unbelievable situation, Pakistani surgeons operating on Major Sethi, while the formal surrender had not taken place. In another unfortunate incident that same evening, on another axis, Captain Hitesh Mehta was unfortunately killed in accidental firing. Such are the vagaries of war.

A rare feat of hang up survival also took place in this operation. Paratrooper Mahadev Gurao, while jumping out of the aircraft was left hanging in the air because his parachute strap, which was linked to a wire running down the length of the aircraft, did not snap leaving him dangling upside down, 15 feet below the aircraft. He had possibly about five to ten minutes to survive. The aircraft was at 1200 feet and the wind pressure at that height, the exhaust fumes from the aircraft and the constant buffeting against the belly of the aircraft were factors that beat the life out of even the toughest men. Gurao had lost his helmet too in the jerk and as the aircraft lost height to free him, his body kept crashing against the underbelly of the plane. The crew inside had not been silent spectators. Inside, they worked feverishly, to set him up with another parachute. When that was done, they cut the strap off the first one, and he soon floated gently down to the welcoming earth below. He had been hanging on for dear life for all of 22 minutes, a record in itself.

Reminiscing & Reflecting

Reflecting on the War, some thoughts come to mind. It may be recalled that the Indian Army had launched multiple thrusts into EP and on 11 December, the Northwestern thrust of 101 Area was the furthest from *Dhaka*. But the Para-drop at *Tangail* catalysed it to the extent that in five days we entered Dhaka! There is no doubt that owning the skies with complete air supremacy led to the most favourable situation for an airborne assault – an opportunity that the Indian Army exploited. The impact of this operation was phenomenal, and it broke the morale of Pakistani troops.

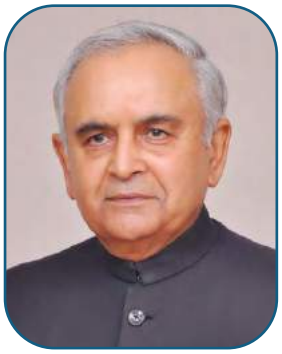
The operation also owes its success to the people of Bangladesh, the Mukti Bahini who supported the Indian Army and provided invaluable intelligence. The local Mukti Bahini leader, Abdul Qader Siddiqui, aka *Tiger Siddiqui,* affectionately referred to by his men as 'Commander', was a young twenty-six-year-old, scruffy looking, bearded ex-student of Dhaka University. Tiger Siddiqui enthused his comrades, led them intelligently and effectively in a multitude of sabotage jobs, blowing up bridges and harassing the Pakistani troops.

From the Indian side, meticulous planning, brilliant execution and good administrative backup also played an important part in the success. Airborne operations are inherently complex in nature, requiring a tremendous amount of coordination and fine tuning, both at macro and micro levels. The war occurred in the non-digital era, where the entire staff work was done manually with every operational detail being meticulous recorded. For security reasons, carrying the document for ready reference was not an option. We had to memorise the crucial details like the timings, code words, frequency, geographical indicators and so on.

Overall, credit goes to the Commander, 50 Independent Parachute Brigade and to his detailed planning and foresight. The enthusiasm with which he guided the Battalion during the preparatory stages infused every man in the airborne force.

The driving force of this airborne group was 2 PARA, whose motivation was the age-old tradition of preserving the Battalion's *'Izzat'* (honour). This inspired every individual and the airborne group flew in on its own wings of confidence and high morale. The battalion covered itself with glory. Apart from the *Tangail* Battle Honour, 2 PARA won many gallantry awards to include one Maha Vir Chakra, six Vir Chakras and four Sena Medals. The battalion also had the unique distinction of giving the Guard of Honour at the Dhaka Racecourse on the evening of 16 December 1971 during the surrender ceremony. Later, on 26 January 1972, the battalion participated in the Republic Day Parade fully clad in combat dress including the parachutes. The standing ovation and thunderous applause received by us throughout the parade is still one of the proudest moments of my life.

(This narration includes excerpts from my article 'The Story of the Indian Army's First Airborne Assault' included in the book 'Liberation – Bangladesh 1971', pages 133 to 140, and some excerpts from the article 'Paradropped Into War' by Captain Shamsher Singh, VSM, pages 141 to 149 in the same book, edited by Major General Dhruv C Katoch and Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, published by Bloomsbury India).



Lieutenant General Nirbhay Sharma, *PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) has been the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. He is a distinguished and decorated Field Commander of the Indian Army. An alumnus of the National Defence Academy, was commissioned in the Indian Army in 1966. As a young captain, he fought in the 1971 War and was part of 2 PARA, which he later commanded and went on to command the prestigious 15 Corps in Srinagar. Thereafter, he held the important appointment of Master General Ordnance in Army HQ. After 40 years of distinguished service in the Army, General Sharma was appointed Member of the Union Public Service Commission of India. As a Constitutional Authority, he presided over Interview Boards and Departmental Promotion Committees to select officers for the Civil Services. A former Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and a member of several multidisciplinary think tanks including the USI and IDSA, he is well known in various strategic circles within the country and abroad.*

BATTLE ACCOUNTS

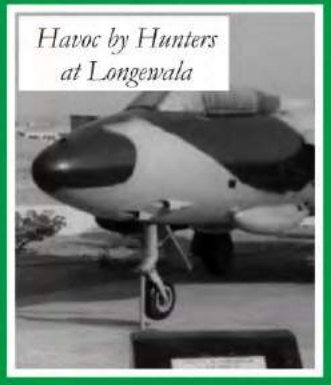
Western Theatre



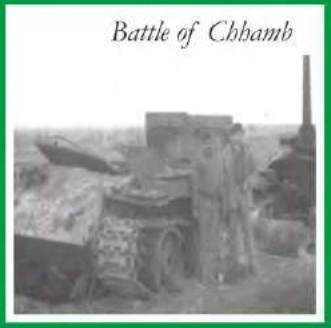
Pakistani Debacle at Longewala



Battle of Basantar



Havoc by Hunters at Longewala



Battle of Chhamb



Chachro



Poona Horse at Basantar

"50 YEARS AFTER THE 1971 WAR"

Special Commemorative Issue



Damaged enemy tank in the Chhamb area

BATTLE OF CHHAMB 1971

A Panoramic Turret View from a Chhamb Knight Tank

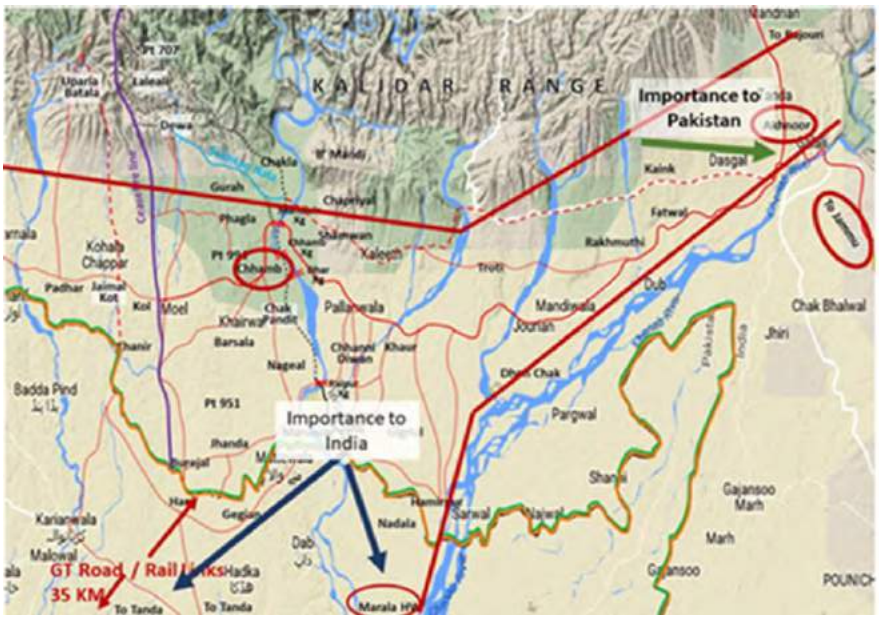
This is a brief recollect which draws a condensed, edited battle account from the book "The Little Giant Stands Tall" written by a select team of 72 Armoured Regiment veterans (including this writer) published in December last year to kick off the 1971 war Golden Jubilee celebrations. It portrays as to how a newly raised armoured regiment, now known as the "Chhamb Knights" was declared "operational" on the 117th day and was deployed for operations on the 129th day. And when the war ended on 16th December i.e. 169th day from raising, it was one of the two units to have been conferred with "Battle Honours Chhamb" and one of the eleven to be conferred "Theatre Honours J&K". In terms of metrics, this "youngest Regiment to be blooded in war" had been toughened and tempered in the days that led to the red-hot crucible of battle. The assiduous effort to have attained this razor's edge involved knitting a team of Officers, Junior Commissioned Officers and Other Ranks from different regiments with varying equipment profiles into one cogent potent force.

How it all began

The "force level" assessment of a war that would need to be fought on two fronts demanded that additional units be raised. 72 Armoured Regiment was thus raised on 01 July 1971 at Ahmednagar with Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Inder Jit Chopra as the first Commanding Officer (CO). The Regiment was equipped with T-55 tanks and was to become operationally fit in a cramped environment of urgency.

Military routine has that magical ability to bind troops from diverse background to rapidly get moulded into one cast. The newly raised unit went through a relentless training schedule including conversion classes, collection of equipment and inter-Squadron competitions (sports and professional). The selection of colours, crest, motto and accoutrements that provide uniqueness to the Regiment were deliberated and decided. With each packed day, a new identity of pride – the Squadron, the Regiment were burnished with the time-honoured credo of the Indian Army i.e., Naam, Namak Aur Nishan. A string of VIPs came to check the status of raising that included a visit by Shri Jagjivan Ram, the Raksha Mantri.

New T-55 tanks were received from Poland at the Mumbai docks in October 71, transported by train to Ahmednagar, taken straight to makeshift field garages for inspection and then moved to KK Field Firing Ranges. The blending of man and machine was achieved with sight zeroing, firing varying techniques based on threat perceptions, mobility of being able to fight as one at Troop, Squadron and Regiment level; all done within four days with the Regiment being declared "Operational for War".



Significance of Chhamb

The tanks were moved straight from the ranges to the railway station, to be transported to the operational area. The Regiment was placed on the orbat of 3 (Independent) Armoured Brigade, whose peacetime location was Jammu. The unit moved to Ismailpur Field Firing Ranges (located between Kathua and Jammu) by 04 November 1971. Battle zeroing was done to reconfirm accuracy of the zeroed tank guns and in the absence of standard targets the Regiment used strewn nullah boulders (painted white with chuna) as an improvisation. Everyone was aware that the clock was ticking and being innovative was a compulsive necessity.

Chhamb – its vitalities

The Chhamb sector was pre-eminent in the strategic calculations of both India and Pakistan. It had been inadequately defended in 1965 allowing Pakistani forces to reach a few kilometres short of Akhnoor in less than 72 hours. For India, the Chhamb sector led to the main Indian line of communication to towns of Naushera, Rajouri and Poonch. The crucial link to all these was the Akhnoor Bridge across the Chenab river. The loss of Akhnoor town would have caused considerable embarrassment.

There were numerous nullahs emanating from the hills and a number of small ridges. Sarkhanda (elephant grass) with growth up to 10 feet, reduced visibility and also concealed movement. The Kalidhar Hill range constituted the Northern edge of the Chhamb Sector running roughly in an East-West line.

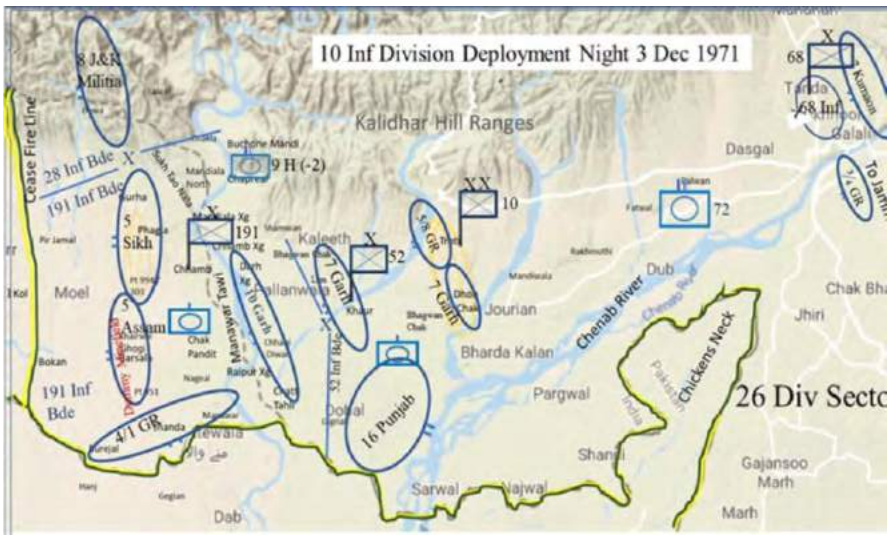
The most prominent and tactically important features in the sector were the two ridges known as Mandiala North and South. These ridges dominated the critical Mandiala crossing and the Mandiala bridge over Munawar Tawi, some 4 kms North-East of Chhamb. Mandiala North ran along the Southern bank of Sukh Tao Nullah. The Southern ridge dominated the Mandiala Bridge which was constructed after the 1965 conflict. Munawar Tawi and Sukh Tao Nullah were the two main water courses running from North to South. Munawar Tawi was a tank obstacle with a wide bed, steep banks and crossing places at Mandiala, Chhamb, Darh and Raipur.

The Battle Plans

The Defensive Design : It was generally perceived that the area West of Munawar Tawi could not accommodate a major deployment of troops and it was not considered advisable to fight with an obstacle at the back of the defender. 10 Infantry Division's area of responsibility encompassed the hill sector, the lower areas of Kalidhar range and the plains of Chhamb – Jaurian – Akhnoor. It had three infantry brigades, with 28 Infantry Brigade in the hills, 191 Infantry Brigade deployed both West and East of Munawar Tawi along the Troti – Kaleeth – Dhon Chak ridgeline, with a covering force to the West of the Munawar Tawi. Its third brigade, 52 Infantry Brigade was the 15 Corps reserve, given counterattack tasks in the corps zone and thus not initially available to the division.

The plan was to have covering troops consisting of an infantry battalion and an armoured squadron to the West of Munawar Tawi. Thereafter an armoured regiment less a squadron and a company each from the other two battalions were to cause attrition and denial of the area East of Munawar Tawi for 48 hours; and then fight the battle from the main defences.

On 01 November the Army Chief visited the division where he revised and approved the move forward of 191 Infantry Brigade to the West of Munawar Tawi into a 'Forward Poise'. On the evening of 01 December, two days before outbreak of hostilities, the division was ordered to adopt this defensive posture by 04 December. Accordingly, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) ordered immediate readjustment of defences (revised operational order was issued on 02 December), with 191 Infantry Brigade to deploy West of Munawar Tawi, with 10 GARHWAL RIFLES at the Raipur and Darh crossings East of the river. 52 Infantry Brigade deployed opposite the Nadala Enclave to the South with a battalion in area Dhon Chak. 3/4 GR continued to be responsible for the 'Chicken Neck' Sector (directly under divisional command). 68 Infantry Brigade was assigned counterattack tasks with units deployed at Troti – Akhnoor.



Pakistan's Offensive Plan

Pakistan's offensive design was to repeat its 1965 plan with the intent to capture Akhnoor. Major General Iftikhar Khan Jhanjua (a favourite of General Yahya Khan) had taken command of 23 Infantry Division in late September. The Pakistani plan broadly entailed a break in and establishment of lodgements by 66 and 111 Infantry Brigades to the North of Moel and opposite Ghogi – Barsala on night 03/04 December, enabling the Pakistani 11 Cavalry Group to breakout by first light 04 December. 11 Cavalry Group was to advance towards Mandiala Crossing and secure the home bank of Munawar Tawi before last light 04 December. Thereafter, 111 Infantry Brigade was to advance and capture Chhamb by last light 05 December. On capturing Chhamb, 66 Infantry Brigade and 111 Infantry Brigade were to clear all opposition up to the West Bank of Munawar Tawi.

Simultaneously, Pakistan's 20 Infantry Brigade was to make feint attacks in the South in area Burejal-Munawar, Nadala enclave and hold the ground against a possible Indian counter offensive in the Southern half of the salient. On successful completion of tasks by 66 and 111 Infantry Brigades, 20 Infantry Brigade was to capture Jhanda, Munawar and Malke Camp and advance Northward.

In subsequent phases, Pakistan's 4 AK Brigade was to establish a bridgehead on the Munawar Tawi by first light 05 December at the Mandiala Crossing and capture Kachreal Ridge. Pakistan's HQ 2 Armoured Brigade supplemented with 12 (Independent) Armoured Squadron, an infantry battalion and 28 Cavalry would then breakout from the bridgehead and capture Palanwala, and would then advance towards Troti Heights. Further operations towards Akhnoor would be undertaken thereafter depending on the situation. Simultaneously, 7 AK Brigade was to attack Indian localities in the hill sector to keep the Indian 28 Infantry Brigade tied down.

The Battle Unfolds

The Western front lit up on 03 December when Pakistan launched airstrikes on Indian military airfields at dusk and later in the night, ground attacks at different points across the Ceasefire Line and International Border (IB).

191 Infantry Brigade defences to the West of Munawar Tawi had not been fully completed and all minefields had not been laid fully. It was in this scenario that Pakistan's 23 Infantry Division launched its attack code named 'Sword of Allah'. The attack commenced with heavy shelling with 66 Infantry Brigade in the North and 111 Infantry Brigade in the South of Moel. By 0200 hours 04 December, 66 Infantry Brigade had captured an area of 3000 yards depth across the Ceasefire Line providing a lodgement wide enough for Pakistan's 11 Cavalry Group to induct and breakout.

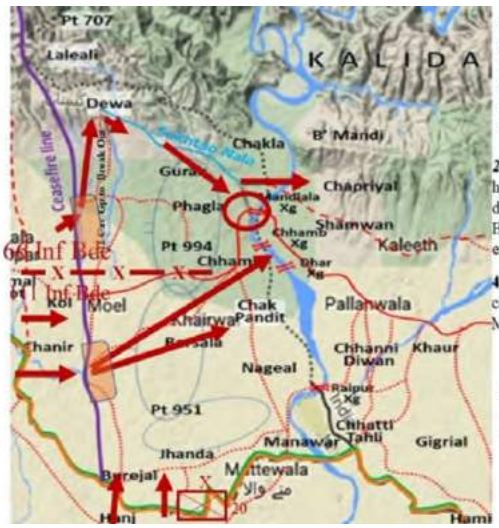
111 Brigade in the South, however, failed to gain a foothold across the Ceasefire Line due to timely reinforcement by a platoon of 5 ASSAM supported by troops of 9 HORSE. 9 HORSE was placed under command 191 Infantry Brigade, while C Squadron of the Regiment less one troop was retained East of Munawar Tawi in area Khaur/Chati Tali. A troop of 9 HORSE was sent to guard the Mandiala Bridge with a company of 9 Para Commandos. 72 Armoured Regiment moved forward on night 3/4 December and by first light 04

Pakistan's plan for Offensive against India in Chhamb Sector.

H Hr
2100 Hrs 3 Dec 1971

Pak 66 Inf Bde & 111 Inf Bde to secure lodgement across CFL in the area North of Koel and opposite Ghogi - Barsala in the South

11 Cav Gp to breakout and adv towards Mandiala Crossing on Rd Dewa Mandiala and secure the home bank of Manawar Tawi at Mandiala Crossing ***before last light 4 December 1971.***



111 Inf Bde offensive probe towards Chak Pandit and Chhamb to draw 191 Inf Bde reserves and capture Chhamb ***by last light 05 December***

20 Inf Bde in the South to hold ground, and make attack demonstrations in area Burejal-Manawar and Nadala enclave.

4 AK Bde to est Br H & capture Kachreal Ridge & Mandiala Br

Further ops towards Akhnoor depending on the situation

December was concealed and dispersed at Bhagwan Chak. While on the move, the Regiment was asked to stage B Squadron to Kachreal (vacated by 9 HORSE) by first light 04 December.

Just after first light 04 December, Pakistan's 11 Cavalry Group moved out from the Northern lodgement across the Ceasefire Line. Bypassing Gurah, it advanced along Axis Dewa - Sukh Tao Nullah - Mandiala to secure the Western bank of Munawar Tawi at the Mandiala crossing. Some armour from 9 HORSE contested this advance and destroyed seven enemy tanks at Gurah. Despite this attrition, 11 Cavalry less a squadron adopting the Sukh Tao Nullah approach further North, appeared behind Mandiala North and facilitated the infantry to capture it by 1230 hours. Along the Southern thrust, Pak 111 Infantry Brigade tasked to advance and capture Chhamb, did not make any headway beyond the Ceasefire Line. 5 ASSAM and B Squadron 9 HORSE continued to give stiff resistance.

With progress of the Southern thrust held up, Major General Iftikhar Khan decided to exploit the success of the Northern thrust. He tasked 66 Infantry Brigade to follow 11 Cavalry Group's advance and to provide a firm base to 4 AK Brigade for attack at Mandiala crossing by last light 04 December. 4 AK Brigade with 6 AK and 13 AK battalions was to attack and establish a bridgehead across Munawar Tawi at Mandiala crossing before first light 05 December. Thereafter, Pakistan's 28 Cavalry supported by a battalion of 66 Infantry Brigade would breakout from this bridgehead by first light 05 December and capture Palanwala.

Pakistan's 20 Infantry Brigade was to launch a diversionary attack from across the IB in the Southern portion of 191 Infantry Brigade Defended Sector. Moving Northwards, it was to capture Chak Pandit and assist in the capture of Chhamb.

The loss of dominating Mandiala North posed a major threat to Mandiala crossing and the bridge. With a view to recapture Mandiala North, 10 Infantry Division launched a counterattack with B company less a platoon of 4/1 GR ex-Malke Camp with fire support from elements of 9 HORSE at 2000 hours 04

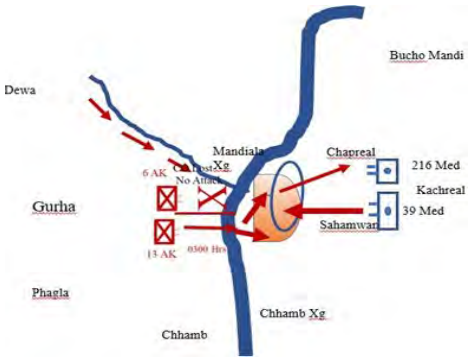


December. The gallant Gurkhas attacked ferociously and managed to capture 2/3rd of the feature but were beaten back as the enemy had reorganised and consolidated its defences. At this stage, 72 Armoured Regiment inducted B Squadron West of Munawar Tawi to area Chhamb on night 04/05 December and placed it under command 191 Infantry Brigade.

72 Armoured Regiment and 68 Infantry Brigade were now tasked to recapture Mandiala North by first light 05 December. C Squadron under Maj Amarjit Singh located at Kaleeth and 7 KUMAON located at Akhnoor were to undertake this task. C Squadron edged forward towards Mandiala Crossing waiting for 7 KUMAON to marry up whose move was delayed due to nonavailability of vehicles. R & O Group of 7 KUMAON while closing in, came under enemy shelling and sustained injuries. The Division Commander then decided against the capture of Mandiala North and instead ordered these troops to defend the Eastern bank of Munawar Tawi opposite Sukh Tao Nullah and Mandiala crossing, with deployment to be completed before first light 05 December.

Pakistan's 4 AK Brigade commenced the bridgehead operations with 6 AK Battalion on the left and 13 AK Battalion on the right at 0300 hours on 05 December. As luck would have it, 6 AK Battalion lost their way and failed to participate in the attack. Neither Commander 4 AK Brigade nor CO 13 AK Battalion were aware of this fiasco.

13 AK Battalion launched the attack on schedule with both forward companies establishing footholds on the Eastern Bank. Thereafter the Northern attacking company lost direction by veering Northwards on crossing Munawar Tawi and ran into 216 Medium Regiment gun areas deployed in Chapreal. There was utter confusion as the company ended up in a hand-to-hand fight with these medium gunners who fought tenaciously. This resulted in two of the batteries being rendered out of action, the depth battery of 216 Medium Regiment and 39 Medium Regiment located in close proximity engaged the enemy infantry by direct shooting, causing heavy casualties and blunting the attack before armour could be inducted into the bridgehead.

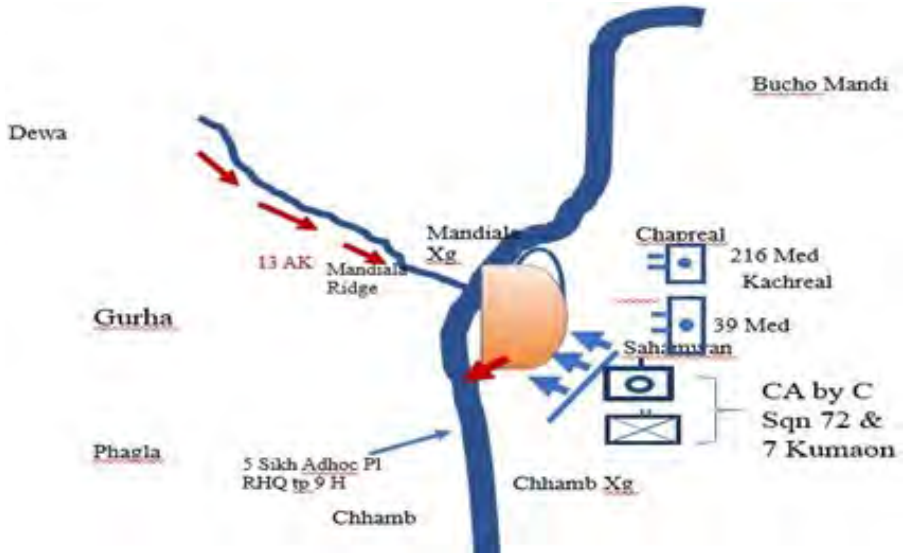


13 AK Battalion attack at Mandiala Crossing

The Southern company of 13 AK Battalion however, made it to Kachreal High ground and ran into C Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment and 7 KUMAON who engaged the enemy and forced them to retreat. While retreating, these companies of 13 AK Battalion tried to hold on to the Eastern Bank of the crossing. Major Amarjit Singh, leading C Squadron with a company from 7 KUMAON launched a quick counterattack from the East and dislodged them. In this action, his tank was hit by artillery shelling and the driver was wounded. C Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment and 7 KUMAON evicted the enemy from the Eastern Bank, and by the afternoon of 05 December had restored the operational situation with Pakistan's Northern thrust blocked. 13 AK Battalion lost 26 personnel killed in action and 50 personnel were taken as prisoners including Lieutenant Colonel Basharat Raja, their CO.

Meanwhile to the West of Munawar Tawi, a couple of our tanks readjusted their positions from Gurah towards Mandiala Bridge to quickly take on the retreating 13 AK Battalion and inflicted additional casualties. These tanks then reverted to their parent troops and engaged Pakistani armour advancing towards Munawar Tawi. B Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment led by Captain AS Mann destroyed five enemy tanks and four recoilless Guns. Two of his tanks suffered direct hits, the gun of one was damaged while the other caught fire which was later extinguished.

To the South, the advance of Pakistan's 20 Infantry Brigade towards Area Mangotian was contested by Lieutenant Gautam Chopra leading No 3 Troop, B Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment. During this operation, he sustained injuries due to shelling and was evacuated. Quickly assuming command of the Troop, Squadron Daffedar Maj (SDM) Fateh Singh continued to delay the enemy.



Counterattack by C Squadron and Company 7 Kumaon

Since the Pakistani thrust in the North had been blocked by C Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment and 7 KUMAON, Major General Iftikhar Khan again shifted his focus to the Southern thrust by employing a major part of 111 Infantry Brigade and 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade, 28 Cavalry along with a squadron of 26 Cavalry towards Chhamb, Darh and Raipur crossings. Ghogi Barsala held by 5 ASSAM was attacked by 111 Infantry Brigade and armour, the attack was repulsed with support from No 3 Troop B Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment in which the replacement Troop leader SDM Fateh Singh was wounded, and Lance Daffedar (LD) Mahabir Singh assumed command of the Troop. It speaks volumes of the calibre of junior leadership of the regiment seeing how boldly both NCOs handled the Troop one after the other, after Lieutenant Gautam Chopra's injury and evacuation.

Throughout the night of 05 December, the enemy continued to attack Ghogi Barsala and managed to push back forward elements of 5 ASSAM. However, CO 5 ASSAM launched an immediate counterattack with the reserve company, No 3 Troop B Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment and available tanks of B Squadron 9 HORSE providing fire support. This successful counterattack denied success to the enemy till the morning of 06 December.

In the North, continuous attacks by 66 Infantry Brigade supported by 11 Cavalry resulted in Gurah heights being captured by Pakistan at 1230 Hours on 06 December. Considering its tactical importance, Commander 191 Infantry Brigade decided to counterattack it with D Company 5/8 GR (fresh troops just inducted) supported by half squadron under 2iC of 72 Armoured Regiment. The attack was launched while the enemy was still reorganising and Gurah was recaptured by 1930 hours.

Meanwhile, at Mandiala crossing, as dusk approached the enemy made another attempt to force a crossing. 7 KUMAON supported by C Squadron continued to deny any ingress when at around 1730 hours due to enemy's heavy shelling the OC and 2IC of C Squadron, Major Amarjit Singh and Captain ML Safaya conferring the battle situation on the Squadron Commander's tank were killed in action.



Major Amarjit Singh



Captain ML Safaya

Towards the South, Pakistan's 111 Infantry Brigade supported by 28 Cavalry and one squadron of 26 Cavalry launched another attack and captured Ghogi Barsala. The enemy armour found a dummy minefield gap between Jhanda and Burejal and exploited it with speed. Simultaneously Pakistan's 20 Infantry Brigade supported by squadron 26 Cavalry managed to overcome the defences of 4/1 GR at Munawar and came up to un-held Malke Camp.

At this point, GOC 10 Infantry Division ordered the redeployment of 191 Brigade to the East of Munawar Tawi to be completed by 2130 hours. Due to the prevailing battle situation in which both A and B Squadrons 72 Armoured Regiment were still in enemy contact, it was to be a fighting disengagement.

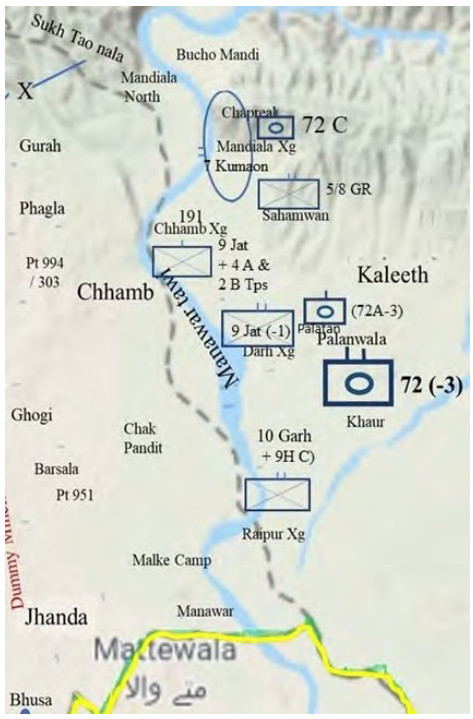
B Squadron was in a fire fight with the enemy infantry at Chak Pandit. One tank, while manoeuvring in pitch darkness at a brick kiln near Chhamb, got stuck in the dugout earth. Despite all efforts it couldn't be pulled out, the armaments were taken out and the fighting compartment destroyed before abandoning it. The Observation Post (Artillery) tank while providing cover to the rest of the withdrawing Squadron was surrounded by the enemy infantry. The driver of the tank Sowar Ram Kumar Jat was killed while Acting Lance Daffedar (ALD) Katar Singh, the gunner, was taken prisoner. Taking advantage of darkness and incessant shelling, ALD Katar Singh managed to break free, got into the tank, closed all cupolas and engaged the surrounding enemy with machine gun fire. In the resulting melee, he was able to drive across Munawar Tawi to join the other tanks of the Squadron. For this exemplary courage ALD Katar Singh was decorated with the Vir Chakra (VrC).

A and B Squadrons of 72 Armoured Regiment withdrew across the river at the Chhamb Crossing by 0100 hours 07 December. Eventually except for six tanks including five destroyed by enemy action and one bogged and abandoned (at the brick kiln at Chhamb), the entire Regiment was across and redeployed on the East bank of the Munawar Tawi.

Reflecting on the battle so far, even though the "Forward Poise" was adopted by 191 Infantry Brigade as late as 01 December by supplementing the existing shallow deployment, the Brigade resolutely held at bay this major offensive and denied any success across Munawar Tawi for three days. All three squadrons of 72 Armoured Regiment and two squadrons of 9 HORSE stood off the attacking Pakistani armour while supporting the Brigade. Had this 'Forward Poise' decision been taken earlier, it could have allowed deployment of the fourth battalion (10 Garhwal Rifles) to cover the gap between 28 Infantry Brigade and 191 Infantry Brigade West of Munawar Tawi. This would have blocked 11 Cavalry Group's uncontested advance along Sukh Tao Nullah to Mandiala, especially so since this was what Pakistan had done in 1965.

Own disengaged troops were replenished with essential repairs and maintenance tasks done. Considering the enemy build up towards the South, 72 Armoured Regiment used the pause to familiarise, as they had not done any reconnaissance of the area earlier. The terrain South of Chhamb crossing on the Eastern bank of Munawar Tawi presented difficult going with many boggy/slushy patches at Darh and Raipur crossings.

Pakistan launched a two battalion up attack across Munawar Tawi in the area South of the Chhamb crossing on 8th December. One of the attacking battalions got lost and did not take part in the attack, the other battalion attacked 9 JAT and 10 GARHWAL RIFLES positions in the area South of Darh and Raipur crossings at 0400 hours. The foothold gained was beaten back in a counterattack by 9 JAT and 10 GARHWAL RIFLES with a Troop of A Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment and a Troop of 9 HORSE. Some enemy infantry soldiers infiltrated further East and mounted one of the tanks of A



Redeployment East of Munawar Tawi

Squadron and with hand grenades blew up the ammunition killing ALD Dharam Chand and severely injuring ALD Gulab Singh who later succumbed to his injuries.



8 Dec.1971, Enemy Infantry managed to climb atop. A Sqn tank and threw grenades inside cupola. Amn burst. Opr ALD Dharam Singh killed instantly. Gnr ALD Gulab Singh died MH Pune 22 Dec 71.

On the evening of 08 December, an Indian Air Force aircraft was shot down and Squadron Leader (later Air Marshal) Denzil Keelor parachuted into the no-man's land opposite Kachreal. Captain Khanna of C Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment immediately rushed to help him as he had injured his back and piggybacked

him to 7 KUMAON Regimental Aid Post. The GOC presented Captain Khanna with the Squadron Leader's parachute.



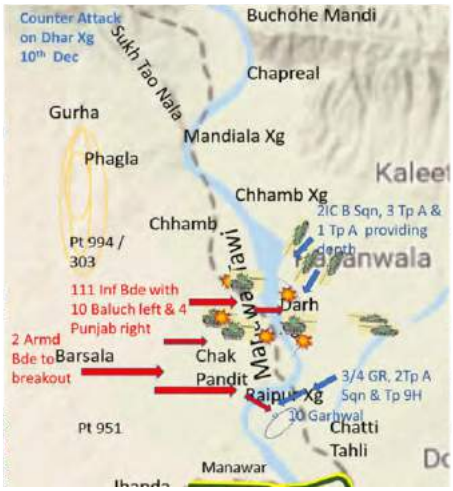
Squadron Leader Denzil Keelor

On 9th December, the dashing Major General Iftikhar Khan, GOC 23 Infantry Division died in a helicopter crash while landing at the tactical Headquarters of 111 Infantry Brigade in the afternoon.

On the night of 09/10 December the officiating GOC, Brigadier Kamal Matin continued with the plan of attack on areas Darh and Raipur crossings. 111 Infantry Brigade launched a two battalion up attack along the Darh and Raipur crossings on 9 JAT and 10 GARHWAL RIFLES localities. These positions fell after a protracted and bitter fight, in which the Company Commander of 9 JAT at Darh, was killed in action. The enemy had managed a bridgehead of 4000 metres wide and 1000 metre in depth and was poised to breakout towards Palanwala.

A company 3/4 GR along with No 3 Troop A Squadron 72 Armoured Regiment was tasked to counterattack Raipur crossing. However, tanks of both, Pakistan's inducted armour and own counterattack troops got bogged down due to the slush. Our troops (reinforced with more armour) created a perimeter to prevent further expansion of the bridgehead and due to effective fire, forced two enemy tanks to be abandoned by their crew. This force subsequently became the firebase for the main counterattack later.

GOC 10 Infantry Division ordered deliberate counterattacks on both Darh and Raipur crossings, GOC 15 Corps personally arrived to witness the execution. Both bridgeheads were to be assaulted from multiple directions - 72 Armoured Regiment with two companies of 5/8 GR was to launch the counterattack on Darh crossing from the North, simultaneously a company of 3/4 GR and a company of 10 GARHWAL RIFLES was to counterattack Raipur crossing with support of C Squadron from 9 HORSE. The counterattack force was to follow the alignment of the Munawar Tawi with its right flank resting on the waterline to maintain direction.



Counterattacks at Darh and Raipur Crossings: 10 December

The counterattack on Darh crossing was launched at 1730 hrs, although the boggy ground greatly checked the pace of tank movement, yet the attack went through as planned and the bridgehead cleared of all enemy presence by 1930 hours. Simultaneously, Raipur crossing was successfully attacked by a company of 10 GARHWAL RIFLES from the South and by a company 3/4 GR from the North-West supported by C Squadron 9 HORSE. The next morning, five enemy tanks that were destroyed and one in running condition that had been abandoned, were found in the bridgehead areas.



Major MS Paintal on an abandoned enemy tank

A major action to recover the bogged down tanks during the Darh counterattack was undertaken, hampered by the non-availability of a commensurate T-55 Armoured Recovery Vehicle (ARV) as only one vintage Sherman ARV was available. In a 48 hours effort from 11 to 13 December under enemy shelling and air attacks - all tanks were recovered.

Pakistan GHQ pulled out 111 Infantry Brigade, 66 Infantry Brigade & 26 CAV and 2 (I) Armoured Brigade along with 11 CAV on 11/12 December for tasks in other sectors. The Munawar Tawi Line was now held by 20 Infantry Brigade and 4 AK Brigade. With this an eerie peace descended on the Front.

Conclusion

The Battle of Chhamb was effectively stalled on the banks of the Munawar Tawi till the ceasefire on 16 December with 72 Armoured Regiment being significant in:

- C Squadron blunting Pakistan's Northern Thrust in area Sukh Tao Nullah/Mandiala crossing on 05 and 06 December.
- A and B Squadrons disrupting and delaying the Southern Thrust from 04 to 06 December across the Chhamb salient West of Munawar Tawi.
- Containing/evicting attempts to establish crossings by the enemy across the Munawar Tawi on 08 & 09 December.
- Deliberate counterattack on 10 December led by the Regiment along with A & B companies from 5/8 GR at Darh and 3/4 GR (less two companies) at Raipur by which the enemy was thrown back across the Munawar Tawi.



72 Armoured Regiment's Chhamb War Memorial

Epilogue

When the Regiment moved for its second tenure at Mamun in 1997, it was decided that a War Memorial be made befitting the Regiment's role in the Chhamb Battle. Kachreal Heights was selected as it afforded a dominant view of the complete battle zone and where the presentations of both 65 & 71 Chhamb battles are made to visiting dignitaries by 10 Infantry Division. The complete construction work was undertaken by the men of the Regiment without any outside assistance, it was inaugurated in June 1998 by the first Commandant, Brigadier IJ Chopra and the first Adjutant, the then Colonel of the Regiment, Major General PPS Bhandari, who later retired as Deputy Chief of Army Staff.

In a battlefield area that was 10 km x 8 km, Pak lost 2200 killed out of the total 4900 casualties in the Western Front in this intense and ferocious battle. A newly raised Regiment with tanks received just 56 days earlier, fought a battle in unfamiliar terrain, alongside formations/units with whom there had been hardly any coordination and training. The Regiment destroyed 29 enemy tanks and was conferred with all military honours.



Lieutenant Colonel AK Channan, *an alumnus of NDA, was commissioned into 72 Armoured Regiment in June 1980. He has attended the prestigious Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and has written for various defence & strategic publications. After taking premature retirement at 23 years service, he worked as a strategic aide to Major Jaswant Singh, the then Cabinet Minister for Finance, where he was exposed to governance and policymaking at apex level. With the change of government at the Centre he continued as an adviser to Minister Singh, in his new role as leader of the opposition at the Rajya Sabha. He also helped Jaswant Singh in the research and writing of his memoir A Call to Honour and later, the much-debated book on Jinnah, the founder leader of Pakistan. Later, Channan joined HCL and then Honeywell International as the Country Leader for Public policy where he was responsible for the government / regulatory impact on business strategy across all of Honeywell's global strategic business groups in India.*



Operations of 1 Corps into Shakargarh Bulge. Map Source Google Maps.

BRIDGEHEAD OVER THE BASANTAR

In one of the last battles of the 1971 War, a bridgehead was established over the Basantar Nala by the Bison Division, leading to a fierce and intense battle. Tremendous courage and valour came to fore as the Basantar Brigade held on.

The Battle of Basantar was fought in the strategically significant Shakargarh Bulge, located between the Chenab and Ravi rivers. The tip of this bulge points towards Madhopur Headworks and the Pathankot Military Base. The southern edge of the Bulge rests on the Ravi River, to the East of which are the sensitive cities of Amritsar, Batala and Gurdaspur. The terrain in the bulge is flat with many nallahs running North to South, of which Degh, Bein and Basantar are the prominent streams.

India's 1 Corps, an offensive (strike) corps with 36, 39 and 54 Infantry Divisions had planned an offensive in the Shakargarh Bulge, whereas Pakistan's 1 Corps was responsible for its defence. The Pakistani Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Irshad Ahmad Khan had deployed 15 and 8 Infantry Divisions between the Degh Nadi and Bein rivers, supported by 8 Independent Armoured Brigade in a defensive role.

The Indian 1 Corps offensive commenced at 1830 hours on 5 December 1971 with an advance on a broad front between the Degh Nadi and Bein River as under :-

- 54 Infantry Division supported by 16 Armoured Brigade from the area Mawa – Galar, South of Samba, on the highway to Jammu.
- 39 Infantry Division with 72 Infantry Brigade (of 36 Infantry Division) supported by 2 Armoured Brigade from area Londi- Chak Dolna – Mangu Chak, South-west of Hiranagar.

The Pakistani Army had mined the area extensively and placed covering troops to delay the advance of the Indian forces. Major General WAG Pinto, commanding 54 Infantry Division also called the 'Bison Division' was a brilliant and unconventional military leader. He chose an axis of advance that minimized exposure to the minefields. The advance was led by 16 Armoured Brigade, commanded by Brigadier AS Vaidya (later Chief of Army Staff) with 9 Engineer Regiment clearing safe lanes through the minefields, enabling the troops to advance with minimum casualties of men and tanks. Bison Division planned to capture Zafarwal after establishing a bridgehead (protected crossing with a bridge) over the Basantar Nala thus rendering the Pakistani defences of the Supwal Ditch ineffective. The enemy's 24 Infantry Brigade was holding the Barapind area across the Basantar Nala, supported by a regiment of tanks with 8 Independent Armoured Brigade held as a reserve.

74 and 91 Infantry Brigades, the leading brigades crossed the border at 2000 hours on 5 December 1971 and cleared the forward posts held by the enemy. After several actions during the next week, the Bison Division contacted the 24 Infantry Brigade defences near the Basantar Nala. The firm base for the break-in operations on Basantar was secured by 91 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier A Handoo (later Army Commander) by the evening of 14 December.

47 Infantry Brigade was tasked to establish the bridgehead over the Basantar Nala to include areas Barapind, Lalian and Saraj Chak in Phase 1. In Phase 2 of the Divisional attack, Jarpal and Lagwal areas were to be captured. 47 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Bhardwaj had 3 GRENADIERS, 6 MADRAS and 16 MADRAS as also 17 (Poona) HORSE and 18 Rajputana Rifles (less two companies). 16 MADRAS was to capture Saraj Chak and 5R (a relatively higher ground), 3 GRENADIERS was to exploit the success of 16 MADRAS and capture Jarpal and Lagwal in the next phase. 6 MADRAS along with 17 HORSE was to occupy the bridgehead and expand it to enable breakout by 16 Armoured Brigade. The break-in attack commenced on 15 December.

16 MADRAS commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Ghai

met stiff resistance and the areas of Lalial and Saraj Chak were captured after a fierce hand-to-hand fight. Through the night, the Pakistanis launched several counter-attacks to dislodge 16 MADRAS but the unit beat back the enemy. At dawn, a thick fog, common in Punjab in winter enveloped the area and the Pakistanis counter-attacked with armour and heavy artillery shelling. As he rallied his troops to defeat the enemy's counter attack, Lieutenant Colonel Ghai was wounded with a bullet piercing his chest. Though grievously wounded, he ensured that his battalion held on to the bridgehead before he succumbed to his injuries. For his gallant actions, Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Ghai was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC). In one of the counter attacks, the Pakistanis captured a portion of the area held by Havildar Thomas Phillipose's platoon. Thomas rallied the rest of his platoon and charged fiercely at the enemy with bayonets drawn and was wounded. For this gallant action, he was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra.

Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Airy was commanding 3 GRENADIERS which was to capture Jarpal and Lagwal in the second phase of the offensive by 47 Infantry Brigade. On the night of 15/16 December 1971, Lieutenant Colonel Airy led the battalion attack in close quarter combat with the enemy. The enemy counter-attacked thrice to dislodge the GRENADIERS but their counter-attacks failed. Most of the enemy attacks came on Major Hoshiar Singh's company at Jarpal; despite being wounded, he motivated his troops and ensured that the enemy attacks were disrupted. Major Hoshiar Singh was bestowed India's highest gallantry award, the Param Vir Chakra (PVC) for capturing and defending the bridgehead on Basantar and the Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Airy received the Maha Vir Chakra.

Once the bridgehead was captured, 17 HORSE successfully defended the bridgehead and destroyed several Pakistani tanks. Two regiments of 8 Independent Armoured Brigade, 13 Lancers and 31 Cavalry put in repeated assaults but 17 HORSE under Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh supported by the artillery and the steadfast infantry holding on to the bridgehead, destroyed 48 tanks of the enemy. The area of Basantar and Barapind became a graveyard for the enemy tanks. For his exceptional leadership and gallantry, Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. The tank battle of Basantar has been described in detail in the next article.

54 Infantry Division thus succeeded in destroying a major portion of Pakistan's 8 Independent Armoured Brigade, as well as 24 and 124 Infantry Brigades (brought in for launching counter-attacks from the area of Rahimyar Khan). The Battle of Basantar was indeed fought ferociously, the valiant war heroes of the Battle of Basantar were honoured with two Param Vir Chakras, Six Mahavir Chakras and three Vir Chakras.

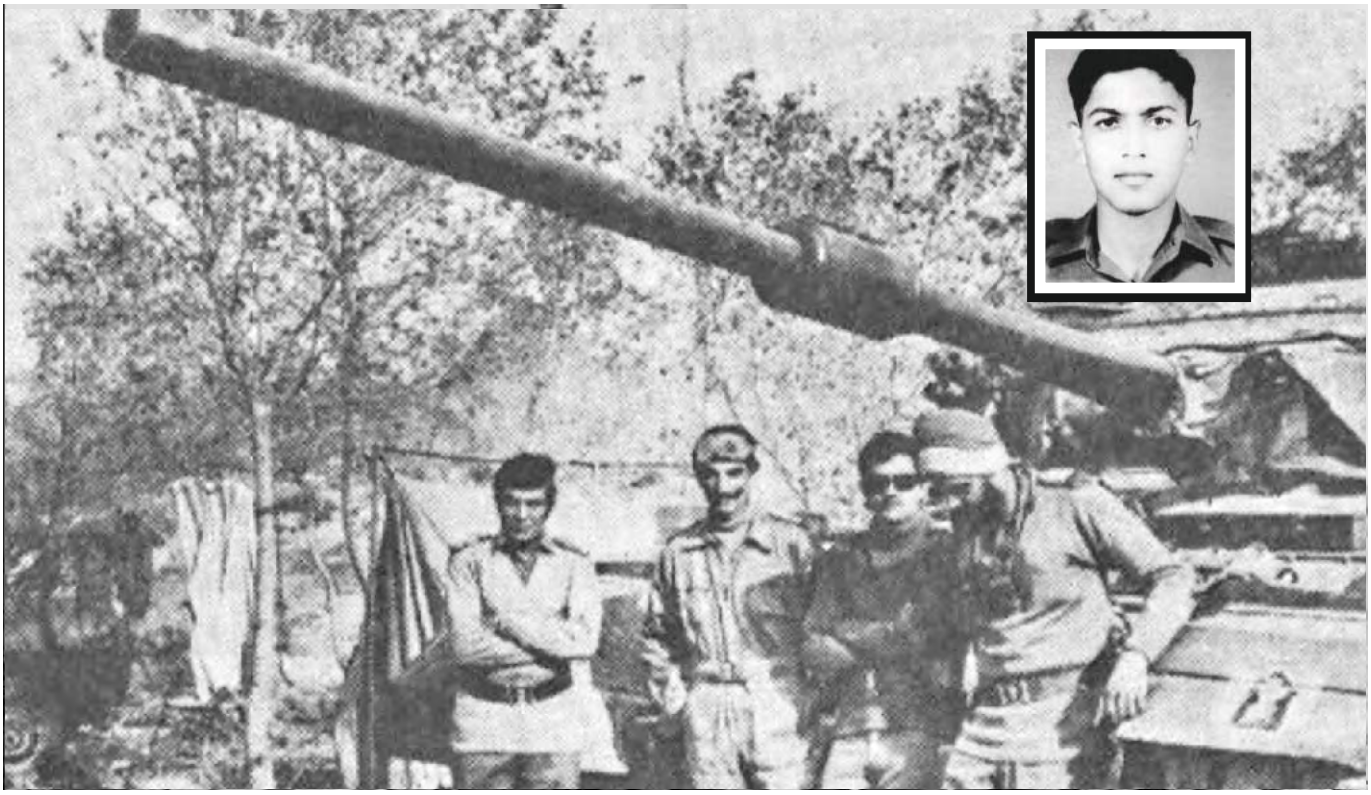
9 Engineer Regiment too played a crucial role in the Battle of Basantar. Under Lieutenant Colonel B T Pandit, the regiment led the advance of the Bison Division by de-mining the extensive minefields laid by the Pakistan Army and by continuously creating operational tracks for the heavy elements of the division to move on. Major V R Choudhary and Captain Ravinder Nath Gupta of 9 Engineer Regiment, who led this mission, sacrificed their lives and were posthumously awarded Maha Vir Chakra and Vir Chakra respectively.

47 Infantry Brigade is today called the Basantar Brigade. All Battalions and Regiments that were part of the Battle have been bestowed the Battle Honour "Basantar" and celebrate Basantar Day in December every year. I had the privilege of attending Basantar Day with 16 MADRAS in December 2008 when the battalion was a part of the brigade I was commanding – 91 Infantry Brigade. It was an emotional moment, when I met Mrs Ghai, the widow of Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Ghai, MVC at this event. While proudly sharing the gallant exploits of the battalion and her husband, tears filled her eyes and moved all our hearts.

No account of the Battle of Basantar can be complete without a word about Major General Walter Anthony Gustavo (WAG) Pinto. An impressive personality with an unconventional approach and a never-say-die attitude, his exceptional planning and visible leadership made a great impact. His buzz line was "Bash On Regardless" and the Bison Division did bash on and destroyed an armoured brigade of Pakistan, a defeat, much criticized in Pakistan in the post-1971 enquiry into their operational failure. He was awarded the Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM) for his fearless leadership during the war. A book authored by him recounting his experience, mainly in the Battle of Basantar, is titled "Bash On Regardless" and makes interesting reading. To vividly remind the citizens of Secunderabad of the battle, Lieutenant General Pinto placed one of the captured Pakistani Patton Tanks on the bank of the Hussain Sagar Lake in the heart of Secunderabad, which is why the area is called "Tank Bundh". Lieutenant General WAG Pinto, PVSM, who led Bison Division to victory, breathed his last at the age of 97, in Pune on 25 March 2021, nearly fifty years after the war of 1971. I had the privilege of commanding the Bison Division in 2013.



Lieutenant General Cherish Mathson, *PVSM, SM, VSM (Retd), was commissioned into 7 GARH RIF in June 1980, and went on to command the same battalion. During his service, he held several challenging assignments including command of 91 Infantry Brigade, the Bison Division and a strike Corps in the desert sector. Before retirement, he served as an Army Commander on the Western Front in 2018.*



Commandant with Squadron Commanders : (L-R) : Man Singh, Hanut, Ajai and Amarjeet Bal. Inset 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal, PVC

THE POONA HORSE AT BASANTAR

Hanut Singh led Poona Horse across a partially cleared minefield to beat back intense attacks by the Pakistani 8 Armoured Brigade onto our bridgehead across the Basantar Nala. The tank battle resulted in Pakistan losing 48 Patton tanks – a crippling blow.

The Battle of Basantar as we call it (Battle of Barapind as the Pakistanis call it) was possibly one of the most violent 'fast and furious' tank vs tank battle fought after World War II. It was an extremely critical battle fought in the Western Sector in the 1971 Indo Pak War, as an adverse outcome would have meant destruction of the Basantar Bridgehead and along with it, scores of our soldiers.

POONA HORSE was operating under the command of 47 Infantry Brigade for this bridgehead battle. As per the brigade plan, 16 MADRAS was to capture area 2R in Ghazipur reserve forest upto and including Saraj Chak in Phase 1 with the attack commencing at 1930 hours on 15 December. In Phase 2, 3 GRENADIERS was to capture Jarpal and thereafter link up with 16 MADRAS at Saraj Chak. The engineers were to trawl a safe lane through the minefield after Phase 1. POONA HORSE was to induct after Phase 2 and ensure protection of the bridgehead.

The enemy armour reserves were located in the Ghazipur Reserve forest, from where they could easily launch a counter attack to destroy the breach on the Basantar minefield. Therefore, control of the Ghazipur

reserve forest was vital. The POONA HORSE battle plan was thus as under:

(a) C Squadron and 18 Rajputana Rifles (less two companies) to secure the Ghazipur Reserve forest, if necessary by launching a night assault by tanks and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs). C Squadron was to thereafter link up with 16 MADRAS.

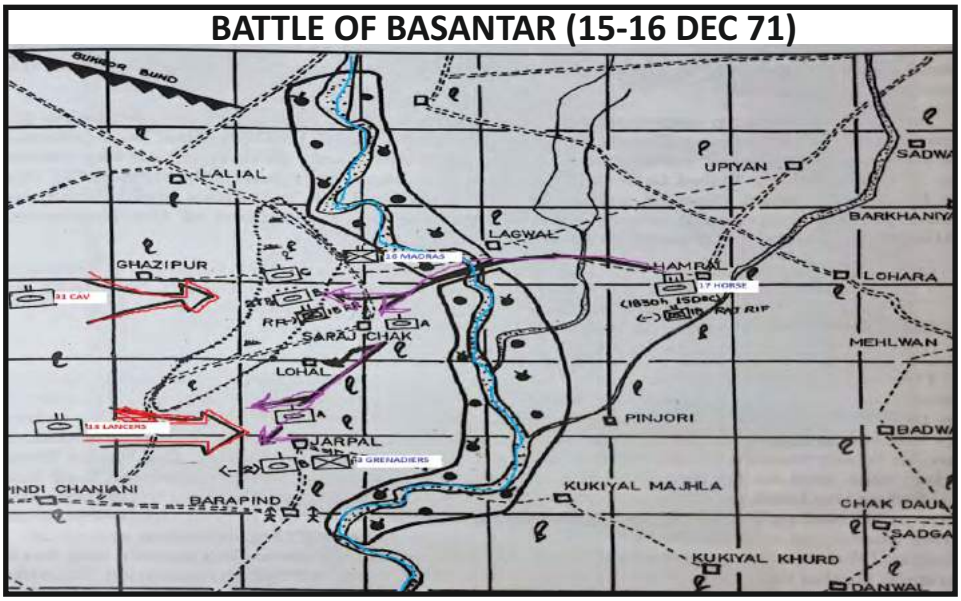
(b) B Squadron to link up with 3 GRENADIERS at Jarpal.

(c) A Squadron was to be in reserve at Saraj Chak.

8 Armoured Brigade, the enemy corps reserve with 13 Lancer, 31 Cavalry and 27 Cavalry on its orbat was deployed in the area to contest the advance of our 54 Infantry Division. Incidentally, POONA HORSE had shed a Kaimkhani Squadron to 13 Lancers in 1947 at the time of partition. We thus had a shared history. Pakistan planned to employ 13 Lancers and 31 Cavalry when Indian Forces would threaten the Limit of Penetration which was Road Zafarwal – Shakargarh with 27 Cavalry remaining in reserve at Shakargarh.

By 2330 hours on 15 December, 16 MADRAS and 3 GRENADIERS had captured their objectives and the sappers commenced trawling. At this stage everything appeared to be going as per plan. However, the trawling could not progress as per the timings due to the nullah bed being sandy and the trawl rollers not being able to negotiate the same due to their weight.

By 0200 hours Lieutenant Colonel Ghai, Commanding Officer (CO) 16 MADRAS was making frantic calls about enemy armour building up against them in the Ghazipur Reserve forest area. Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh, our Commandant was called up by Brigadier Bhardwaj, Commander 47 Infantry Brigade to impress that



Enemy armour counter attack shown in red arrows.

POONA HORSE needed to induct immediately or else the bridgehead would be wiped off by the enemy armour. By now the mine field was only partially cleared, 600 yards were still to be cleared. Around 0230 hours, CO 16 MADRAS called to indicate that the situation in the bridgehead was precarious. At this stage Hanut Singh took the historic decision that POONA HORSE must induct, whether the mine field was cleared or not, or else there would be no bridgehead left to protect.

With all tanks following one behind the other in 'Line Ahead' formation, POONA HORSE moved into the partially breached minefield. Instructions were that if a tank blew up on a mine, the following tank would bypass the crippled tank and continue. The crippled tanks would keep using their guns from where they were.

C Squadron was tasked to lead with Captain Ravi Deol's tank being the point tank. By God's grace the entire regiment got across without a single mine blowing. In the bridgehead, there was a complete melee with own 16 MADRAS and enemy 11 Baluch elements in different pockets in the area of Saraj Chak and Ghazipur Reserve forest. B Squadron less two troops headed for Jarpal to link up with 3 GRENADIERS. The balance two troops of B Squadron joined C Squadron. As planned, C Squadron followed by 18 Rajputana Rifles APC's assaulted the Ghazipur Reserve forest at a controlled speed. Tanks followed the technique of firing with level guns and just before first light broke, C Squadron was in position on the far side of the reserve forest. At first light, C Squadron and two troops B squadron were in the Ghazipur Reserve forest, B Squadron less two troops were in Jarpal and A Squadron was in Saraj Chak.

The Tank vs Tank Battle

Around 0830 hours, a salvo of smoke shells was fired by the enemy opposite Ghazipur reserve forest. As the smoke lifted, the enemy tanks halted and took fire positions 600 to 800 yards from our deployment. Thus started the tank vs tank battle that POONA HORSE was anticipating. The reserve forest reverberated with the thunder of Centurions 20–pounder guns. In the ensuing fire fight, more tanks of the enemy joined in. The Commandant had positioned his tank well up in the line of engagement. He personally took active part in the tank battle and destroyed two Pakistani Patton tanks.

While the counter attack by Pakistan 31 Cavalry came to a grinding halt opposite Ghazipur reserve forest, the enemy moved 13 Lancers with the aim of

exploiting a gap created between Jarpal and the reserve forest. Sensing this move, Major AS Bal (later Brigadier AS Bal, MVC), commanding B Squadron requested for reinforcements. With C Squadron and two troops of B Squadron already engaged in the reserve forest area, Hanut asked A Squadron to move squadron less two troops to plug this gap. Two troops ex A Squadron were immediately despatched under Captain V Malhotra, the troop leaders being Lieutenant Avtar Singh Ahlawat and 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, who had incidentally not even completed his Young Officers Course. While moving, they encountered elements of 11 Baluch still holding on. A mounted assault was launched on these positions during which one tank commander was lost and another was injured. Finally, the three officers namely Captain Malhotra, Lieutenant Avtar Ahlawat and 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal reached the critical area where 13 Lancers counter attack was already in progress. The brunt of the attack was faced by these three officers. Soon 10 enemy Patton tanks were lying burning with the rest having withdrawn. Major Nissar, the Squadron Commander of 13 Lancers regrouped and launched yet another counter attack with 13 tanks against our three tanks. In the ensuing fire fight, a number of enemy tanks were destroyed. Avtar Ahlawat's tank was also hit and he was seriously injured. Captain Malhotra's tank developed a technical snag and his tank gun became inoperative. The situation was grave with the enemy still pursuing the attack with 5 to 6 tanks and on our side only Arun Khetarpal was left facing them. After knocking off 3 tanks, Arun's tank got hit and the tank engine went up in flames. He was gravely wounded. Under these circumstances, he was ordered to abandon the tank. Realising that he being the sole survivor his absence would be disastrous, he made the famous radio transmission, *"My gun is still functional and I will get the remaining lot"*. At this stage his tank got hit again, but he chose not to pull back, as Hanut Singh had given directions to the entire regiment that we will not withdraw even an inch, we will fight from our positions. Finally it was Major Nissar's tank and Arun's tank which fired and hit each other. Arun and his operator achieved martyrdom while Major Nissar was wounded and hid behind his burning tank till last light when he with his crew escaped back to safety.

By 1130 hours on 16th December, the tank battles came to a halt. By the end of the day, 48 enemy Patton tanks were littered in the area, 30 destroyed opposite Jarpal and 18 opposite Ghazipur reserve forest. 13 Lancers, one of the elite regiments of Pakistan was decimated and 31 Cavalry received a crippling blow. 8 Armoured Brigade of the enemy was no longer a fighting force. We had lost nine tanks during the days fighting. The cease fire was declared on 17th December.
After the cease fire, Major Nissar came and inquired as to who was the commander of the lone tank who stood like an insurmountable wall between defeat and victory. He was shocked to learn that he was an officer who had not even done his Young Officers Course.

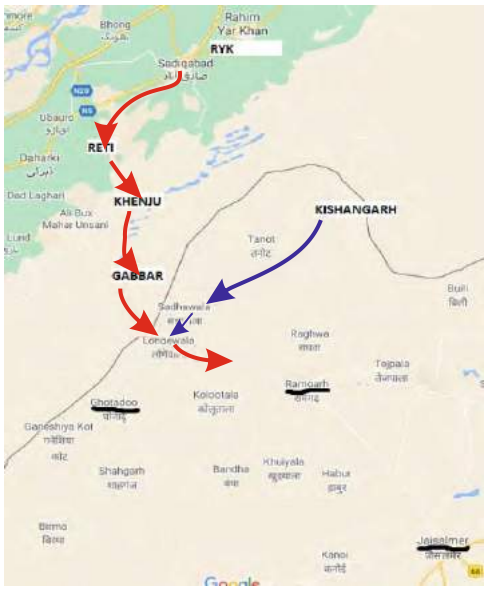
Battle winning factors

1. **Leadership:** Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh not only trained the regiment and made it fit for battle but took critical and timely decisions which turned out to be critical in the overall outcome of the battle, like negotiating the partially breached minefield. He also remained well up and could respond to fast changing battle situations. He despatched two troops to plug the gap which was a crucial and timely action.
2. **Training and Gunnery standards:** In the ultimate analysis when a tank faces a tank, victory goes to the one who shoots first and accurately. Patton was a front line tank of the US Army, however the Centurions which were of 2nd World War vintage came out winners. Simple and fast shooting techniques enabled the Centurion to fire three APDS rounds in 24 seconds against the Patton tank which was much slower.
3. Foolishness of the enemy to do a day light assault on tanks which were in proper fire positions.
4. The enemy was very afraid of being burnt as it is not considered sacred in their religion. The moment their tank was hit, they would abandon it.

The actions of POONA HORSE at Basantar were indeed glorious, in keeping with the ethos and traditions of the Regiment and the Indian Army. 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal was deservedly awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously, with several other officers and men of the unit receiving other gallantry awards. I am honoured to be part of this truly valiant outfit.



Brig Brijendra Singh *(Retd), a third generation Cavalry officer was commissioned into POONA HORSE in April 1971 and fought in the 1971 Indo-Pak war with the regiment. He was wounded during an air attack on 14 December. An alumnus of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, he has commanded an armoured regiment and an infantry brigade. He has held various command, instructional and staff appointments during his over 33 years of army service. Post retirement, he worked in a public sector bank for six years and in the corporate environment for eight years. He resides in Gurugram (Haryana).*



Area of Operations: Pakistani Armour movement marked in red arrows, with own armour reinforcement movement shown in blue. Map Source Google Maps.

PAKISTANI DEBACLE AT LONGEWALA

The Pakistani debacle at Longewala was dramatised in the Bollywood movie 'Border'. This condensed account brings to light the chaos which prevailed on the Pakistani side.

Pakistani Thought Process

General Yahya Khan's war plans were based on the premise that international pressures would ensure that the war remained short, and substantial territorial loss would occur in East Pakistan. His war effort was to therefore capture a large area of Indian territory to enable suitable bargaining at the negotiating table, somewhat akin to the Tashkent Agreement post the 1965 War.

Rahim Yar Khan (RYK) on the Sindh-Punjab main communication arteries was a critical communication centre, and Pakistani intelligence had garnered that India's 12 Infantry Division planned to advance towards RYK. To compensate for its comparatively weaker strength in the area, Pakistan planned a pre-emptive strike towards Ramgarh, the operational location of HQ 12 Infantry Division.

18 Division was constituted to effect the preemptive operation, with 51 and 206 Infantry Brigades alongwith two armoured regiments, namely 22 CAV and 38 CAV. 18 Infantry Division attack plan entailed capture and establishment of a firm base at Longewala by 206 Infantry Brigade and 38 CAV, with 51 Infantry Brigade tasked to proceed further to capture Ramgarh and Jaisalmer. Major General BM Mustafa, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 18 Infantry Division sought the views of the Commanding Officers (CO) of 22 CAV and 38 CAV on the plan on 16 October 1971. Lieutenant Colonel Zahir Alam Khan (later Brigadier), CO 38 CAV, recalled the interaction: *"Lieutenant Colonel Akram Syed Zaidi and I said that the plan would succeed if we made an approach march to the border on one night and undertook the cross border operations the next night and air cover was made available on the first day from dawn to dusk till Ramgarh and Jaisalmer had been secured. The General said he would make arrangements for the air cover."* In early November 1971, the plan was discussed at RYK in the presence of General Tikka Khan and Air Marshal Abdul Rahim Khan, the Pakistan Air Chief, who assured that the required air support would be provided.

A 'Sand Model' Plan

Like in a good sand model discussion, the Pakistani plan sounded good but was not followed up logistically. 38 CAV tank engines were seizing and on 01 December the maintenance teams were tasked to remove the engines and clean the oil sumps and filters. The next day, on 2nd December, CO 38 CAV was told that the operations would commence that evening. The engine maintenance stopped midway, 16800 gallons of octane 80 petrol sought by the unit was not available – they were told that the petrol would be provided 8 kms short of the border. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) informed that they were unable to support the operation as the Jacobabad airfield had not been activated. The division commander was ordered to conduct the operation without air support in the 'national interest'. Some training guns from the Anti – Aircraft School which fired single shot only were the Air Defence asset with the formation.

The Pakistani Divisional plan entailed an approximately 100 kms

approach march till the border, plus another 60 km plus advance to Ramgarh by 51 Infantry Brigade (comprising two infantry battalions) and 22 CAV while bypassing Longewala enroute. 38 CAV less a squadron, 1 PUNJAB (ex 206 Infantry Brigade) and a mortar battery were to follow behind 51 Infantry Brigade, and then continue to Jaisalmer. 206 Infantry Brigade was to secure Longewala with a battalion, while leaving a battalion on the RYK Front. Pakistan's GHQ ordered that the operation was to commence on 03 December at 1530 hours, with the border being crossed at 2130 hours, and was to continue to Ramgarh and Jaisalmer – a distance of 200 kms to be done in a night, **a farfetched sand model plan indeed.** The Pakistani commanders met at HQ 51 Infantry Brigade on the evening of 02 December, and realized that the brigade HQ had not collected maps of the Indian side – the map was blank! Indian defences or deployment was not known, Pakistani intelligence had indicated that Longewala was a BSF post. They were not aware that Longewala had been reinforced by a company of 23 PUNJAB under Major KS Chandpuri.

The Pakistani Movement Fiasco

On 3rd December, 38 CAV entrained at Sadiqabad to move to Reti railhead, where they were expected to reach by 1800 hours. The Pakistan railways had not been apprised of the movement plan, the tank train was delayed and reached Reti at 2100 hours. The approach march from Reti to Khenju to Gabbar commenced and a squadron arrived at Gabbar by about 0100 hours on 04 December. 22 CAV and 38 CAV were the only units to reach Gabbar by morning of 4th December. The 4x2 civilian requisitioned vehicles could not negotiate the loose sand, and 20 FF of 206 Infantry Brigade marched across the desert. The petrol lorries were also stuck in the sand near Dharki. The operation was postponed by a day, and the Jaisalmer plan was dropped. 1 PUNJAB reverted to 206 Infantry Brigade too.



Punjab Battalion troops celebrating atop a destroyed Pakistani tank at Longewala.

The Battle Begins

Pakistani armour columns moved out from Gabbar around last light on 4th December, and reached the border around 2100 hours. About two hours later 51 Infantry Brigade Group crossed into Indian territory after refueling, but with a lot of dissension and friction within the leadership. In the words of Lieutenant Colonel ZA Khan, CO 38 CAV, *"I met Brigadier Tariq Mir (Commander 51 Infantry Brigade) and he told me that he intended not to go beyond Longewala".*

A few kms across the border, the reconnaissance troop of 38 CAV disappeared (the NCOs had hidden their vehicles). Four tanks of the leading squadron of 38 CAV broke down and two running tanks reached short of Longewala by daylight.

Meanwhile on the Indian side, Lieutenant Dharamvir of 23 PUNJAB was out on a patrol from Longewala towards Border Pillar 638. After midnight, he reported enemy armour movement and estimated the strength as about two squadrons (30 tanks). At 0400 hours on 05 December, 23 PUNJAB (part of 45 Infantry Brigade) was placed under command of 30 Infantry Brigade of 12 Infantry Division, as 30 Infantry Brigade was located nearby at Sadewala. Major General KC Khambatta, GOC 12 Infantry Division allotted a Replacement Tank Troop (which was located to the South of Sadewala) to 30 Infantry Brigade. The rest of Indian armour was at Kishangarh, 80 kms to the Northeast. Brigadier EN Ramadoss, Commander 30 Infantry Brigade described the situation, *"My brigade was to lead the advance towards RYK at first light on 5th December 1971. I happened to be two kilometres West of SADEWALA (my Brigade Forward Concentration Area) alongwith my battalions 17 RAJ RIF (SAWAI MAN) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel AS Grewal and 6/5 GR (FF) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kanti Swarup, waiting for transport. My leading group of 13 Kumaon Regiment (REZANGLA 1962) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel RV Jatar, 20th LANCERS (AMX), 6th Independent Armoured Squadron (14 T-55 tanks) under Major RD Law were already in KISHANGARH".*

Pakistani medium guns had started shelling Longewala after 0230 hours, and Brigadier Ramadoss asked General Khambatta to allot the available air

support at first light, *"due to the disparate relative strengths of four Indian AMX tanks against an estimated 30 tanks of Pakistan (which turned out later to be 48 T-59 and 12 Sherman Mark V American tanks)."* 30 Infantry Brigade troops were also reeled back from the planned RYK offensive. It would be best to recall the battle in the words of Brigadier Ramadoss,

"One company of 17 RAJRIF was to proceed with the troop of tanks to reinforce Longewala and the remainder of 17 RAJRIF was to build up on Longewala later as per the situation. One company of 6/5 GR was to provide a screen two kms ahead of our own defences at Sadewala. When the leading tanks of the Pakistani force reached about a km South-West of Longewala Post on the road to GHOTARU at about 0515 hours, Major Chandpuri informed my Brigade Major, and ordered his recoilless guns to open fire. No tank was hit. In return, the Pakistani troop knocked every structure at the post to rubble (Temple escaped) and set fire to a large stack of fodder for camels. This silenced 'A' company completely. The left platoon fell back from their positions, leaving Major Chandpuri with just his company HQ personnel and one platoon on the post. Surprisingly the Pakistani armour did not press the attack.

Actually there was no physical assault on the post by enemy tanks or infantry. This was confirmed later by a Pakistani Bangladeshi Officer who was with the leading Pakistani infantry battalion and escaped to our side after the cease fire. There was no dead body or crippled tank within 400 meters of the post.

Our fighter planes, Hunters, flew over at telescopic first light at 0730 hours and reported there were no tanks visible. I realised the pilots were new to the desert, asked them to hang on over the target area and requested our Division HQ to send up Major Atma Singh, our Air OP Flight Commander, to direct the fighters onto enemy tanks. Then the Air Force had a merry day; with Major Atma Singh and Captain Sangha directing the planes alternately, knocked out 23 tanks (19 T-59 and 4 Shermans) during 5th and 6th Dec 1971. It was confirmed later that there had been no recoilless gun hit on any of those enemy tanks. Our fighters dared to come singly even, once they realised there was no enemy air cover to their armoured thrust in the open desert. Two Pakistani Starfighters strafed my Brigade Column towards Border Pillar 635 on the afternoon of 8th December 1971, the only air attack during the whole operation. Their absence for three days is quite inexplicable. Had they been there on 5th December 1971, our Hunters would have been seen off.

Lieutenant Colonel AS Grewal of 17 RAJ RIF and I had been on the road Longewala-Sadewala two kms short of the Longewala helipad from 0900 hours onwards behind 'A' Company 17 RAJ RIF who did the link up. At 0915 hours our leading AMX tank was hit by one enemy T-59 which had come upto the helipad. Our tank blew up along with its crew of three but had also hit the enemy tank which was abandoned by the crew, leaving the gunner dead inside. At 1300 hours Major Atma Singh force landed on the helipad near the abandoned T-59, picked up the maps from inside the tank, reported to my HQ at 1500 hours and said that the enemy tank seemed to be a running one. My Staff Officer, Captain Ramesh Khatri drove it back to my HQ at 1700 hours. This was the only running Pakistani tank captured in the whole operation. The shell from our AMX tank had hit the side of the main armament, ricocheted into the hull and killed the gunner whom we buried in our HQ at Sadewala.

The 6th Independent Armoured Squadron (14 brand new T-55 tanks) under Major RD Law, VrC rushed back on tracks from Kishangarh and arrived at Longewala helipad area at 1300 hours restoring our morale."

During the entire day, the Hunter aircraft played merry hell with the Pakistani Forces, the detailed narration of the air action is in the next article. Major Atma Singh and Captain PS Sangha from 12 Air OP Flight also did a remarkable job and were awarded Vir Chakras.

The Pakistani offensive was in shambles. Later that day, Brigadier Tariq Mir was ordered to capture Longewala and Ghotaru, he refused saying that an Indian brigade had linked up with Longewala and the Indians were too strong for the brigade to attack. Commander 206 Infantry Brigade took charge and ordered CO 28 Baluch to advance towards Ghotaru and capture it. Lieutenant Colonel ZA Khan recalled *"The CO 28 Baluch disappeared and explained after the ceasefire that he understood that he was to make a wide outflanking movement to Ghotaru by withdrawing to the Sadiqabad-Sukkur road."*

Pakistani Forces started withdrawing after last light on 5th December. By 11/12 December, Major General BM Mustafa had been sacked and Major General Abdul Hamid Khan took charge of the beaten 18 Infantry Division.

It would be best to conclude by quoting the assessment of Captain P S Sangha, VrC (later Colonel): *"I had the aerial view for the first 5 hours of battle on 05 December 71. I have had access to the views of the Pakistan Armoured Regiment Commander and that gives a good insight to the causes of failure of a brilliant plan. Briefly:*

- *Very poor logistics planning by Pakistan.*
- *No air support provided to attacking force since the forward base had not been activated by PAF.*
- *The Pakistan Brigade Commander was forced to go for the operation. But he never had the will to go beyond Longewala. That is why they got stuck there instead of bypassing Longewala.*
- *Chandpuri did a good job by sticking it out till the IAF came on the scene next morning.*
- *With no air threat the small Hunter force decimated the Pakistani armour. Effectively the battle was over by the afternoon of 05 December 71 since a big portion of the Pakistan armour had been destroyed."*

As I conclude, I can emphasise that senior commanders must visualize a battle as it is likely to pan out. The lack of air support and air defence with the offensive force should have made the Pakistani leadership review the plan. Their lack of tactical insight led to the debacle!

Lt Gen J S Sandhu
Editor

(Statements of Brigadier EN Ramadoss, Colonel PS Sangha and Lieutenant Colonel ZA Khan, Pak Army and the inputs for this article have been drawn from http://signals-parivaar.blogspot.com/2018/10/longewala.html)



Hunter Aircraft at Jaisalmer Airbase.

HAVOC BY HUNTERS AT LONGEWALA

In a noteworthy example of Army- Air cooperation, Hunter aircraft based at Jaisalmer alongwith Air OP pilots and the Army formation blunted the armour advance towards Longewala. The day undoubtedly belonged to these air warriors.

During the 1965 Indo-Pak war it was realised that the Indian Air Force (IAF) did not have enough forward airfields in Rajasthan. As a result, air bases came up at Uttarlai (near Barmer), and at Jaisalmer. Created as 14 Care and Maintenance Unit (C&MU), Jaisalmer did not have much of a role during peace time. A detachment of six Hunter MK 56 aircraft, four fighters and two trainers of Armament Training Wing were deployed to Jaisalmer in October 1971, thus making it an operational airbase. The detachment was designated 122 Squadron, Air Force. In addition, considering a planned offensive from Tanot – Kishangarh, 12 Air Observation Post (Air OP) of the Army, operating Krishak aircraft was based at Jaisalmer for carrying out their task of aerial observation of the battlefield.

On 03 December 1971, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) launched pre-emptive attacks against various air bases of the IAF, but Jaisalmer was not included - an oversight that cost them dearly. The next day, 04 December, Hunters of 122 Squadron carried out strikes against Jacobabad and Rahim Yar Khan (RYK) airfields, and also provided close air support to the Army. On the way back from an attack on RYK, the pilots spotted a few tanks inside Pakistani territory towards the West. This information was passed on to 12 Infantry Division, but did not get due attention.

In the early hours of 5th December 1971, Wing Commander MS Bawa, Jaisalmer Base Commander got an urgent radio call, *"This is Tiger, here (GOC 12 Division). I suspect that an enemy armoured column is making rapid headway for Ramgarh. Our post at Longewala has heard tank noises throughout the night and seen tanks go past it with full headlights towards Ramgarh. I want your boys to investigate as early as possible."*[i] The concern and anxiety was evident.

Aircraft were prepared and aircrew briefed. Since the Hunters had no night capability, flying operations could commence only at first light. The first mission of the day, flown by Flight Lieutenant DK Dass and Flying Officer RC Gosain took off at the crack of dawn. Each aircraft was armed with 12 x T-10 rockets and 30 mm cannons. The mission flew to Ramgarh and carried out a reconnaissance along the road from Ramgarh towards Longewala to check the disposition of the enemy. Longewala, about a hundred kilometres Northwest of Jaisalmer, was about 10 -12 minutes of flying time from Jaisalmer. Guided by the pilots of 12 Air OP Flight, the mission found the Longewala area filled with tanks and other vehicles. The Air OP pilots confirmed that the tanks were indeed of the enemy.

Choosing a tank which was close to the besieged post, the mission leader entered a dive, put his aiming index on the tank and fired half his rockets. The tank lumbered a few meters in the sand, and went up in flames. His No. 2 witnessing the kill, yelled excitedly, "You have got him". Getting into firing range himself, No. 2 aimed at a tank near the helipad and pressed the trigger, with a similar result.

The mission continued their attacks till they expended all their ordnance, returning to base thereafter for replenishment and rearming. They had destroyed two tanks and crippled five. The second pair of Hunters was soon overhead, continuing the dance of death. At the end of the second mission, two more tanks were destroyed and six more tanks damaged. This relay followed for the rest of the

[i] "Saga of Longewala" by Air Mshl MS Bawa, PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd) (http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1971war/1281-longewala-saga.html#gsc.tab=0)

day, continuing to rain destruction on the enemy. There were about a dozen pilots in the squadron and every pilot joined the mission. Some 'hogs' had to be almost prised out of the cockpits after completing their missions.

One of the pilots, Kukke Suresh narrated, *"I took off later in the morning with Sherwin as my leader. It was an awesome sight at Longewala, with several tanks on fire and some still smouldering. We had carried twelve T-10 rockets to be fired in three passes, to be followed by 30 mm cannon attacks. Tanks were going round and round in crazy circles, kicking up dust to hide themselves to the extent possible. During a gun attack, one of the tanks whose main gun was pointing towards me fired a shell. Although the shell did not hit me, the flash and dust blinded me and my aircraft just fell out of control. I hit a sand dune at 420 Knots and I am living to tell the tale. During those fleeting moments, I remembered my entire life. As the dust cleared, I found myself flying very low but the aircraft was just about controllable. Sherwin had by then started heading home and I called out to him, since I could not catch up, as the speed was not building up above 250 Knots even with full throttle. He quickly joined up with me and his talking to me eased all the tension. I flew the aircraft back to base and landed safely with his encouragement. It was unbelievable to observe that about 4 feet of jet pipe was missing and even more amazing that the engine continued to function, although there was diffusion/loss of thrust. In retrospect, the shell probably disturbed the airflow that led to loss of control. Sherwin Tully was an outstanding example of leadership and professionalism, who let his deeds talk."* [ii]

It was a race against time to launch as many strikes as possible against the tanks in daylight. Every available technician at Jaisalmer was released from other duties to help do the replenishment and rearming in the shortest possible time. The air attacks were taking deadly effect. A mission that landed at 1400 hours reported that after attacking the only three tanks that they had spotted, they had to shift their attacks on to vehicles. This was the first indication that the Pakistani offensive had been blunted. Only half a day had gone past. A radio message from the Pakistani intruders back to their HQ was intercepted and confirmed the situation:-

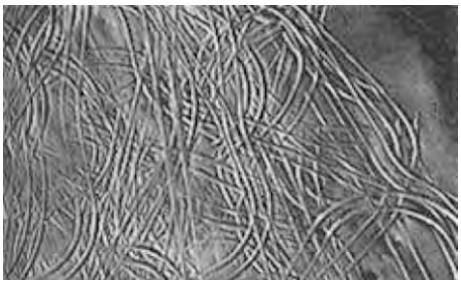
"Dushman ki hawai fauj ne nak me dam kar diya hai. Ek hawai jahaz jata hai, aur doosra ata hai, aur bees bees minute tak uppar nachta hai. Chalees feesadi (40%) fauj aur tank hallak aur tabah ho chuke hain. Aage barna bahut mushkil ho gaya hai. Jaldi hawai fauj madad ke liye bhejo, nahin to wapas aana bhi mushkil hai."

("The enemy air force has been creating havoc; one aircraft leaves and another comes and stays overhead for twenty minutes. 40% troops and tanks have been destroyed, injured or damaged. Further advance has become very difficult. Send air force for help as soon as possible otherwise even a safe withdrawal would be difficult.")

The last mission found the enemy retreating on the sandy track leading back to Gabbar in Pakistan. There was a trail of damaged or destroyed armour, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), and vehicles, all along the track back to Gabbar. A message received that evening from the Divisional Commander, read,

"Personal from GOC for Base Cdr (.) We had excellent cooperation and support today (.) Shooting by your boys had been most accurate resulting in destroying number of enemy tanks and blunting the attack (.) Please convey my appreciation and that of my troops to the pilots (.) Congratulations on excellent performance (.)" [iii]

The first mission on 06 December checked all routes leading to Jaisalmer for any enemy intrusion. The mission flew low and slow, but found no trace of the enemy towards Jaisalmer. Satisfied that there was no threat to Jaisalmer, the mission then proceeded towards Longewala, for the second part of the mission – destruction of the retreating enemy. The mission attacked and destroyed vehicle concentrations near Gabbar, which appeared to be the administrative echelon of the enemy. Disabled, charred and abandoned tanks lay all along from Kharo Tar to Longewala.



Air photo of tank tracks after the battle at Longewala, taken from a Canberra aircraft.

The Battle of Longewala was a fine example of cooperation between the Army and the Air Force. Of the 45 tanks that had intruded, 37 tanks had been destroyed or damaged as also, innumerable APCs and vehicles that lay scattered all over the area. Longewala became the graveyard of Pakistani armour.

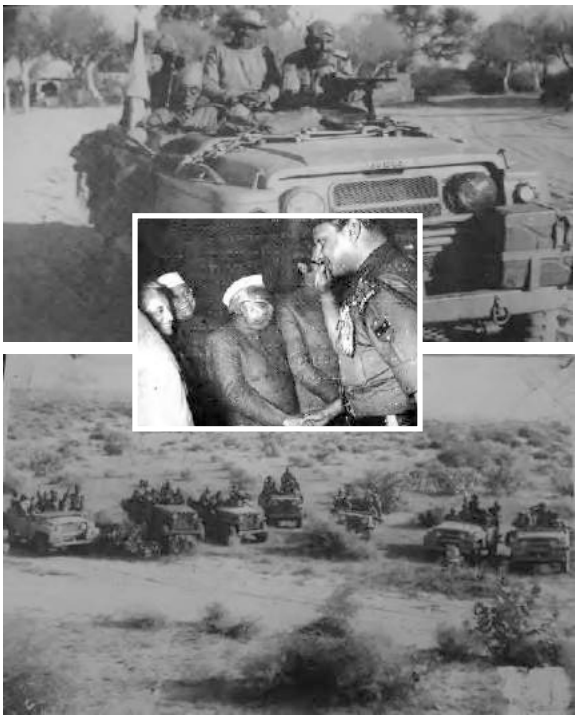
There were two major reasons for this spectacular performance by the Air Force. Firstly the absence of air opposition gave the Hunters a free hand to focus on the tanks, without having to bother about enemy fighters. The second was the absence of own troops in close proximity to the enemy. Had own troops been in contact battle with the enemy, the pilots would have to be extremely cautious in execution of their attacks, for fear of fratricide. This would have affected the speed and effectiveness of their air attacks.

Eight pilots of 122 Squadron were awarded the Vir Chakra for their exceptional performance and bravery in the face of the enemy. In addition, 10 personnel were awarded "Mention in Despatches". For his outstanding leadership, Wing Commander MS Bawa was awarded the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal.

- ***Air Marshal S Harpal Singh*** *(Retd), Consulting Editor (Air)*

[ii] "Battle of Longewala - 5th and 6th December" by Wg Cdr Kukke Suresh (http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1971war/1282-kukke-suresh.html#gsc.tab=0)

[iii] "Saga of Longewala" by Air Mshl MS Bawa, PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd) (http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1971war/1281-longewala-saga.html#gsc.tab=0)





(Left Upper) 10 Para Commando Jonga ready for war. (Left Lower) A Team of Commandos ready to move in their Jongas. (Inset) Lt Col Bhawani Singh with Mrs Gandhi and Babu Jagjivan Ram. (Map) Operations of the Desert Scorpions.

CHACHRO – The Desert Scorpions Strike Deep

The Special Forces are the elite units of the Indian Armed Forces, and have performed remarkably in several operations over the years. In the 1971 War too, 10 Para Commandos secured a vast area of Sindh, through deep strikes and phenomenal boldness.

Bhawani Prepares The Commandos

His Highness Lieutenant Colonel Sawai Bhawani Singh, the Maharaja of Jaipur took over command of 10 Para Commando on 19 August 1968. He was larger than life in every sphere of command and was singularly responsible for conceptualising the commando role of the Paltan. Bhawani was fascinated by the operational role of Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) in the North African Desert during the Second World War. He knew almost all the senior Army hierarchy and convinced them of the type of roles that can be undertaken by 10 Para Commando in the deserts of Rajasthan. Bhawani convinced Lieutenant General KS Katoch, the Vice Chief to organise two assault groups on the lines of LRDG which resulted in the release of 72 light vehicles. A mix of 45 Jongas (Jabalpur Ordnance aNd Gun Assembly) and 18 Jeeps were released to the unit and they started arriving by middle of 1971. These vehicles were sent to a civil workshop in Jodhpur for modification for desert operations. The modified vehicles were fitted with balloon tyres and additional leaf springs were added. A sand channel was heavy to carry and we devised a sand channel using coir matting with bamboo strips to provide the necessary traction. Driver skills defined the ability of the vehicle to

traverse the soft sands and driver training was a big challenge. We required over 100 drivers with 100% reserves. Vehicles, after modifications, kept coming in batches. We started training in earnest to excel in handling the modified Jongas, to carry out operations and to be self-sufficient over a period of 4 – 5 days. Every day battle drills were further fine-tuned and slowly we were becoming a cohesive fighting force.

The three assault groups had three teams each and each team was authorised three 7.62 mm Medium Machine Guns (MMGs) and we also got 2nd World War .30 Browning machine guns, RPG 7V (a Russian anti-tank rocket launcher which was very accurate) and Single Barrel BM 21 Grad P with M21OF rockets. In September 1971, 10 Para Commando less Bravo Group moved to Jodhpur and Bravo Group moved to Agra to prepare for an airborne insertion.

Tasks

The tasks for the unit (in the Barmer Sector) were indicated in October 1971 and were as under:

- Charlie Group to infiltrate along Sarup Ka Tala and ginger up Ranger Wing Head Quarters at Chachro.
- Alpha Group to disrupt lines of communication along the Chachro – Umarkot Axis and, if possible, destroy bridges along the canal in the green belt.

The tasks implied traversing the area against the grain of the country. All movement would have to be through the inter-dunal gaps.

Thakur Balwant Singh, a feudal chieftain of Bhakasar in Barmer district, a dacoit and smuggler, had a well-established racket going on at that time along Barmer and Gujarat border with strong links in Pakistani Sindh. A team of Khojas of the Bawaria Rajputs were indulging in cross border smuggling for him. The folklore went that they never locked their houses and, if anyone comes near their hutments, they would be tracked over time and distances. Traditionally, most of the Rajput fiefdoms used them for their personal gains. Three guides who knew the area pretty well were provided by Thakur Balwant Singh and one each joined the Tactical HQ, Alpha and Charlie Groups.

Crossing Into Sindh

The war was declared on 03 December. On night 4th/5th December, the advance party left to reconnoitre (recce) the launch pads and guide the main body, which also moved up later that night. 05 December was spent in the harbour at Sarup ka Tala for final checks and also catching a shut eye before the commencement of infiltration. Leading the infiltration, Charlie Group crossed the border at last light 5/6 December 1971 but got bogged down in soft sands. Alpha Group was asked to switch routes and infiltrate along the Kelnor – Khinsar – Kita axis. Thus delayed, it was indeed a race against time and I crossed at the Kelnor border at about 2300 hours as part of the Alpha Group. By about 0400 hours, we bypassed Khinsar where we met 20 Rajput who were clearing the area and, by first light, we went into a harbour ahead of Khinsar. Charlie Group, after the initial setback, pulled back and moved to Khinsar, and then moved into a commando base near Khinsar by 0800 hours on 06 December. Around 1030 hours or so, we realised that there was no air activity and we decided to press on towards Kita. The going was tough and slow. Many a time, we were getting bogged down in the sand but the newly recruited drivers, with just over five months of experience, were doing a commendable job. While extricating the vehicles bogged down in soft sands, some of the silencers had burst. The noise of the burst silencers combined with the sound of the exhaust of 70 odd Jeeps and Jongas passing through the inter-dunal gaps, was indeed scary for anyone deployed there.

It was just past dusk when the lead vehicles of Ghansyam Das's (Hill's) Team came under fire from the formidable sand dunes at Kita. Night had settled and visibility was very poor and we could not see any movement on the horizon. Major GK Sanan, our Group Commander asked Captain R S Jamwal (Jimmy), the third Team Commander to come up and tasked his team to clear the dunes at Kita. We were all manning our MMGs to give him covering fire, if required. In fact, Hill's instruction to Jimmy on the side lines was that if enemy opened fire, get flat down on the ground so as to avoid bullets from the covering fire. As Jimmy's team approached the sand dune, they divided into two groups, one moving along the lie of the dune and the other behind the dune. It was a tense wait and by about 2100 hours, Jimmy gave an all clear message on the radio and indicated that he had recovered an abandoned LMG and ammunition. The Tactical HQ fetched up and Sanan briefed the Commanding Officer (CO). After Jimmy returned there was a quick consult and the CO tasked Alpha Group to carry out a confirmatory recce of the route to Chachro as Charlie Group was still fetching up. Jimmy and I carried out the recce in two Jongas. Soon we were amidst the outer hutments of Chachro. We returned by about 0300 hours on 07 December and briefed the CO.

The Chachro Raid

By then Charlie Group had moved up. Since it was lightly held, a decision was taken to raid Chachro instead of bringing down a heavy volume of fire or as tasked 'Ginger Up Chachro'. At about 0500 hours the raid on Chachro was launched with AK Gusain in the lead followed by YSK Gusain. Subedar Sohan Singh's Team assaulted from the South and Hari Singh's Team from the North. Once they entered the town, the vehicles fanned out to clear the area as well as neutralize any resistance. By about 0630 hours, Chachro was cleared and then combing operations began. Charlie Group chanced on the Treasury building. The safe in the building was demolished and a large amount of Pakistani and Indian currencies were recovered in addition to some land records and documents. It was at this time that Charlie Group noticed movement on the sand dunes North West of Chachro.

MMG mounted Jongas brought down heavy fire and the enemy just disappeared. By about 1030 hours Charlie Group regrouped in the town square. We had taken 17 prisoners in addition to 12 killed and a large cache of arms & ammunition. It was somewhere around this time that an aircraft was heard flying at quite a height over Chachro.

There was a scramble and we took position. Alpha Group moved in after the clearance of Chachro and deployed around the town square. The Battalion Head Quarters and the Mobile Regimental Aid Post fetched up too.

The successful raid and capture of the Ranger Wing HQ was reported to the Command HQ. They intimated that Umarkot has been reinforced with armour and enemy has taken up defences along the green belt and therefore the original task was changed to raid and disrupt the lines of communication around Chachro, Virawah and Nagarparkar. 20 Rajput too had moved up and Charlie Group handed over Chachro to them and exfiltrated back. Battalion Head Quarters also exfiltrated along the track Chachro – Bhakasar – Sarup Ka Tala. While they were close to the border, the Border Security Force (BSF) post at Bhakasar opened mortar fire. Bhawani put out a white flag on his Jonga and advanced and the mortar fire ceased.

Target Virawah –Nagarparkar

In Alpha Group, we went into a commando harbour about 10 odd kilometres South East of Chachro. Since not much of air activity was taking place, we pressed on towards Virawah. There was a sense of euphoria and we were racing through the desert. Short of Virawah, some suspicious movement was seen over the sand dunes; two Jongas veered off and brought down blitzing fire. There was an enemy post and MP Chowdhary lobbed grenades into the post and retrieved a Light Machine Gun and a rifle. The main column reached Virawah by last light 07 December 1971 and by 0200 hours on 08 December it was cleared. The enemy had been routed and we found that Virawah was vacated. The advance continued and, at first light 08 December Nagarparkar was raided. After regrouping, we started exfiltrating towards the Rann of Kutch. We had travelled about 60 km deep and about 800 km laterally in over three days.

Action on the Islamkot Axis

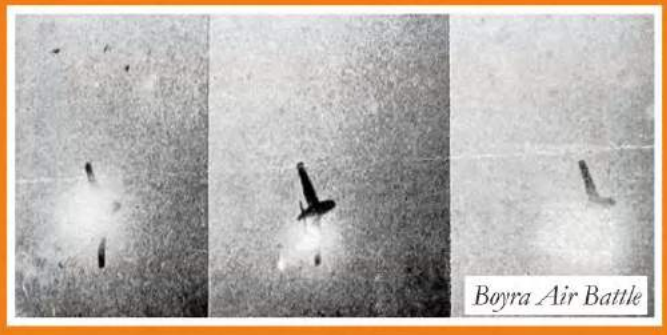
At Barmer, we recuperated and got the vehicles operationally ready. On 12 December, Alpha Group was tasked to infiltrate along the Diplo-Mithi-Islamkot axis and raid and destroy the Ammunition Dump at Islamkot. We moved to Bhuj on 13/14 December. At Bhuj, we learnt that Diplo and Mithi are strongly held. After taking into account our troop deployment and available enemy information, we decided to infiltrate along the Nagarparkar – Lunio - Islamkot axis. We moved to Suigam on 14/15 December and thereafter to Nagarparkar, which was now held by Gujarat Armed Police Battalion. We commenced our movement into enemy held areas after last light on the night of 16/17 December on the Nagarparkar – Lunio – Islamkot axis. Battle hardened by now, our movement was swift and we reached Lunio in the early hours of 17 December. A raid was launched with all three teams assaulting it from three different directions. In this lightning raid, the town was cleared. Advancing further at around 1100 hours, while negotiating a sand dune, the lead vehicles came face to face with two Dodge lorries carrying reinforcements (Rangers and equipment) ahead of Lunio. With nearly 25 odd Jongas bringing down heavy fire, the enemy had no chance in this opportunity ambush. I saw a group of Pakistani Rangers running towards a sand dune. My driver Rohtas manoeuvred around and cut off the enemy from the direction of the dune. I jumped off my Jonga and asked the enemy to surrender – all the while pointing my 9 mm Browning in absolute movie style. Chowdhary was screaming at me to take cover when the enemy just put up their hands and surrendered. To this day, I do not know why they did that. The tally in this ambush was 19 Pakistani soldiers dead and 10 prisoners. We regrouped and heard about the cease fire and Pakistani surrender in East Pakistan. We were asked to return.

End Note : *In retrospect, the sheer speed of operations might have been the reason that the enemy was routed. I have often wondered what would have been happening in the enemy's HQ 55 Infantry Brigade Operations Room at Nayachor. Heavy movements probably of armour and troops were being reported from Kelnor, Sarup Ka Tala, Khinsar, Chachro, Virawah and Nagarparkar nearly 60 kilometres in depth and 800 kilometres laterally. Bhawani Singh played a great role in the 10 Para Commando operations of 1971, meticulously equipping the Paltan for the task and steadfastly executing the operation. He was everywhere and could uplift our morale in most trying times. For that brief period of time, we became the Invincible Super Heroes. The nation recognised our success by honouring the Paltan with the Battle Honour Chachro and Theatre Honour Sindh. The individual awards included one Mahavir Chakra, two Vir Chakras, 3 Sena Medals and 5 Mentioned-in-Despatches.*



Late Brigadier Abraham Chacko *(Retd), an alumnus from NDA, Pune joined 10 Para Commando in December 1970, and was in the forefront of the raids on Chachro, Virawah and Nagarparker in the 1971 War. He thereafter saw active service in many operations including in Sri Lanka and in Kashmir. He has been an instructor at DSSC, Wellington too. He passed away in early June 2021 due to Covid at Bengaluru.*

THE AIR CAMPAIGN



Boyra Air Battle



1971 Air War.



Target Govt.house Dhaka



Sabres over Srinagar



Dogfight Over Dhaka

"50 YEARS AFTER THE 1971 WAR"

Special Commemorative Issue



Boyra Boys, from L to R, Flt Lt Roy Massey, Flying Offr KB Bagchi, Flying Offr Donald Lazarus, Flying Offr SF Soares, Flt Lt MA Ganapathy.

THE BOYRA AIR BATTLE :

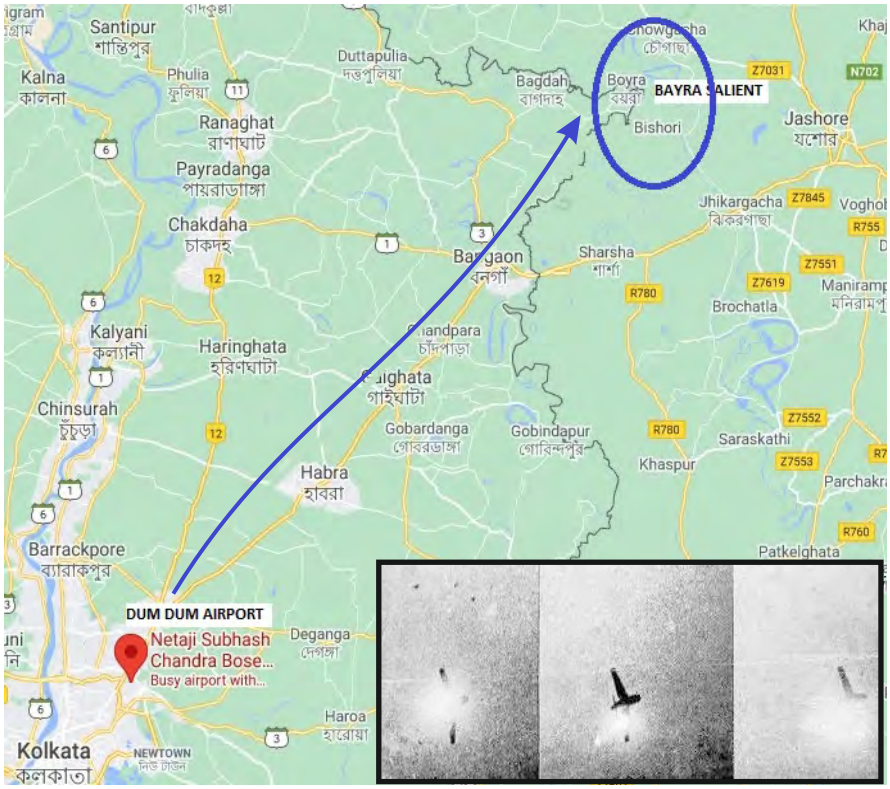
Drawing First Blood

Even before the start of the December 1971 War, air space violations had started taking place along the borders with East Pakistan (EP). Indian Air Force (IAF) jets would take-off to intercept the intruders, and after several attempts drew blood on 22nd November 1971 near Boyra. A narration of the successful interception follows.

Boyra, a three kms wide salient of Indian Territory about 90 kms North East of Kolkata, jutted Eastwards into then EP. It provided a convenient ingress point for the Mukti Bahini for operations towards Garibpur town, Chaugacha village and Jessore City in EP. The Mukti Bahini, raised in April 71, was becoming increasingly effective with time and experience, and the skirmishes between the Mukti Bahini and the Pakistani Army increased in frequency and intensity. There were repeated intrusions by the Pakistan Army and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) into the Boyra salient.

During the Battle of Garibpur near the Boyra salient on 21st November 71 – 22nd November 71, the Pakistan Army called for air support from the PAF. 14 Squadron PAF, based at Tejgaon, operating F-86 Sabres responded by launching air support sorties to the area. While doing so, the PAF aircraft were invariably intruding into Indian air space.

The Sabres would come in formation from Tejgaon till Jessore, flying at low level. At Jessore, they would pull up and form into a stream, heading in a North-Westerly direction to the North of Boyra. Approaching the International Border (IB), they would turn left on a Southerly course, and attack across the salient North to South, going back at low level to Jessore. This pattern was repeated 7-8 times in each sortie.



(Map) Interception Path. (Inset) Gun Camera Images of the downed Sabres.

On the Indian side of the border, Air Defence (AD) of Kolkata area was assigned to 22 Squadron IAF. The squadron was based at Kalaikunda (near Kharagpur in West Bengal) and operated the Folland Gnat aircraft. From September 71 onwards, the squadron also started operating a detachment of five aircraft at Dum Dum, the civil airport at Kolkata, for AD as well as to patrol the IB. Additionally, 254 Signal Unit (SU) operated an AD radar at Barrackpore, and provided radar cover in the area of operations.

254 SU had observed the recent intrusions into Indian air space and scrambled the interceptors from 22 Squadron on a few occasions. By the time the interceptors reached the area of operations, the Sabres would finish their attacks and return. On 21st November, on two occasions, our AD set up was unable to intercept the intruders. The same story was repeated on two occasions the next day, 22nd November 71, in the forenoon.

From 14 Squadron PAF side, two air support missions had already been undertaken in the forenoon on 22nd November. A third mission was planned in the afternoon. The mission was to be flown by Wing Commander Afzal Chaudhary (Commanding Officer), Flying Officer Sahibzada Sajjad, Squadron Leader Dilawer Hussain and Flying Officer Khalil Ahmed. By a quirk of fate, Squadron Leader Dilawar Hussain was replaced by Flight Lieutenant Pervez Mehdi Qureshi. Qureshi had not flown since morning, and was keen to fly. On seeing his enthusiasm, Dilawer Hussain gave his place to Qureshi. The re-constituted formation took off as planned. However, soon after take off, Flying Officer Sajjad experienced R/T problems and had to return to base. The other three aircraft proceeded for the mission.

At Dumdum, the four pilots on 'alert' for the IAF were Flight Lieutenant Roy Massey as leader, Flying Officer S Soares as his wingman, Flight Lieutenant MA Ganapathy as the subsection leader and Flying Officer Donald Lazarus as his wingman. The Commanding Officer, who had been the leader for the two morning missions, had assigned Flight Lieutenant Massey as the leader for the afternoon mission. Having been part of the morning missions, Massey had done his analysis, and was fully prepared, if a situation arose in the afternoon.

Sure enough, at around 1448 hours, 254 SU picked up air activity over Jessore, and the mission at Dumdum was scrambled. The young buckaroos sprinted to their mounts and vaulted into the cockpits to start up. Airborne in pairs, they levelled out at 1000 feet and sped towards the objective, Garibpur, at 'maximum throttle', clocking 450 Knots (517 miles/hour). They maintained complete 'R/T Silence' to ensure the radio transmissions did not compromise their mission. The Sector Director (SD) at 254 SU, Flying Officer KB Bagchi kept giving updates to the formation to help them build up their mental picture, though the formation was not able to hear the R/T clearly due to the deafening cockpit noise at low altitude/high speed.

Once in the battle area, the formation climbed to 3000 feet and started scanning the skies for the adversary. Bagchi reported the position of the Sabres as "One O'Clock, 10 (nautical miles)". Massey replied that he had contact with them, but the adversary aircraft were still within EP air space. For a valid interception, the Gnats had to catch them over Indian airspace, within the narrow span of the Indian salient. Bagchi once again reported the position. Massey identified the aircraft as a Sabre, upon which, Bagchi cleared them to engage and shoot. It was 1459 Hrs. The exchange on R/T went thus:-

Bagchi: "Right Wing Over Attack, Half 12, thousand yards".
Massey: "Contact"
Bagchi: "Request Type"
Massey: "Sabres"
Bagchi: "Cleared to Shoot"

Massey turned right, crossing over above Ganapathy and Lazarus, to position himself for an attack on the 1st Sabre (S1). Soares maintained tactical formation with Massey, keeping a lookout for other aircraft and "clearing Massey's tail";

Ganapathy and Lazarus manoeuvred to the left to make space for Massey and Soares.

Massey reversed his turn to get behind Sabre S1. As he was closing in from 1500 yards to 1200 yards, the Sabre broke into a tight defensive right turn to throw off the Gnat. It was evident that S1 was now aware of the threat building up on him, and was taking evasive action. Massey and Soares followed S1, closing in to 800 yards. With his pipper (aiming index) on the cockpit of S1, Massey fired the first burst from his 30 mm ADEN guns. However, his rounds missed the Sabre, perhaps because of the high angle off; Massey continued to give chase.

Meanwhile, Ganapathy called out 'contact' with a second Sabre (S2). S2 was in fact trying to position behind Massey and Soares with intention to shoot them down or scare them off from his leader S1. As Ganapathy manoeuvred to position himself behind S2, Lazarus fell back to about 600 yards behind Ganapathy. It was then that Lazarus saw the third Sabre (S3), just 150 yards ahead of him. With some deft manoeuvring, Lazarus quickly put his pipper on the Sabre S3, and as the Sabre filled his gunsight, pressed the trigger and fired his guns. It was a short burst and barely 12 rounds had been fired, before the Sabre started emitting smoke. "I got him, I got him", he yelled excitedly on R/T, as the Sabre exploded in the path of the Gnat. The explosion was so close that chunks of debris from the Sabre hit his aircraft, damaging the nose cone and drop tanks. His Gnat immediately started streaming fuel from a crack in the drop tank, which he later jettisoned.

Ganapathy meanwhile fired a burst of his guns at Sabre S2, in front of him. He broke off, pulled up and then rolled back into an attack for a second burst and saw the pilot ejecting. Calling out, "Murder, Murder Murder!', Ganapathy made it known that he had got his quarry. He had fired 57 rounds from his aircraft in his two bursts. Ganapathy and Lazarus joined up, and set course back for Dumdum.

Massey and Soares turned for their second attack on Sabre S1 in front of them. As Massey fired his second burst, his starboard gun jammed. But his third burst landed square on the port wing and fuselage. Massey called out "Murder, Murder, Murder". They overshot the crippled Sabre, which was streaming fuel and smoke, and turned towards Dumdum. Massey had fired 80 rounds from his cannon.

The pilots of S2 (Flying Officer Khalil Ahmed) and S3 (Flight Lieutenant Pervez Mehdi Qureshi) ejected from their stricken aircraft and landed in Indian territory, the wreckage falling near village Bongaon. The pilots were taken into custody, and later returned to Pakistan as per extant protocols. S1 was believed to have crashed near Chaugacha; as per another account, the badly damaged aircraft was recovered at a PAF base in EP.

In a matter of less than three minutes, three Sabres had been shot down by the young Gnat pilots in very restrictive conditions. They pounced upon the opportunity that came their way, and made the most of it. The role of another young officer, Flying Officer Bagchi, who was on the radar was also praiseworthy.

On return to Dumdum, the youngsters were a bit exuberant in the celebration of their victory by carrying out low level beat ups and victory rolls, but nobody minded. After all, it had been over six years since an enemy aircraft was downed in air combat! On landing, the pilots were met by a joyous group of officers and technicians on the ground. Analysis of their gun camera film confirmed the damage and destruction to the three Sabres. Overnight, the three pilots became national heroes.

In recognition of their outstanding performance, the three pilots were awarded the Vir Chakra, and the Sector Director was awarded the Vayu Sena Medal. The Defence Minister Shri Jagjivan Ram and Smt Jagjivan Ram made a visit to the squadron at Dumdum to felicitate the team.

The day after the Boyra Air Battle, (23th November 71), the President of Pakistan declared a national emergency and ten days later, on 3rd December 1971, Pakistan went to war with India. However the IAF had already drawn first blood! Since then, 22 November 1971 is remembered as the Boyra Day.

As a footnote, Flight Lieutenant Pervez Mehdi Qureshi (pilot of S3) went on to become the Chief of the Air Staff of PAF. Group Captain Donald Lazarus (Retd), who was credited with bringing him down in the Boyra Air Battle, wrote him a letter, congratulating him on his appointment. He was pleasantly surprised to get a letter response from Pakistan Air Chief, re-affirming that courtesy is very much a part of the ethos of the Armed Forces.



Air Marshal Harpal Singh, *PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd) was commissioned as a fighter pilot in June 1980. He has about 2500 hours of flying experience mainly on MiG 21, MiG 23, MiG 27 and MiG 29 aircraft. He has commanded a MiG 29 Squadron and has also been a Chief Operations Officer at an Air Force Station. He has commanded two Air Force Stations in the West and East respectively. Besides his DSSC Course, he has also attended the Senior Officers Course at National Institute of Defence Studies, Japan. He has been the Deputy Commandant College of Air Warfare (CAW) and has held important appointments in the strategic arena. He was Director General (Inspection and Safety) of the IAF till his superannuation in May 2019.*



Harish Masand in front of a Hunter Aircraft at Hasimara, photo courtesy Polly Singh (www.bharatrakshak.com).

DOGFIGHT OVER DHAKA

After the Pakistani Air Attacks on the evening of 03 December 1971, the Indian Air Force (IAF) responded with full combat power. One of the first offensive air operations done the next day in East Pakistan is described herein.

Location - Air Force Station, Hasimara or 16 Wing in North Bengal. As a young Flying Officer with less than four years of service, I had been with 37 Squadron, the Black Panthers, for exactly three years since 04 December 1968, and had achieved "Operational by Day" status on Hunter Mark 56/6 just a couple of months earlier. I had all of 240 hours of flying on the aircraft, thanks to a large number of pilots posted to the squadron; at one time, we were 52 pilots against the normal of 20-25 pilots. With so many mouths to feed, I was lucky I was able to fly those 240 hours!

04 December 1971 was a fateful day in our lives. In view of the situation in East Pakistan (EP), we had been on "alert" since the summer of 1971. So, on 3rd December 71 evening, when news filtered in of air attacks by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) on Indian airfields in the West, there was little reaction, and certainly no apprehension of what was to come the next morning. After all, we had been training hard for this day and were eager to get into the real thing. I was fortunate to have flown some photo reconnaissance missions inside EP with Wing Commander SK 'Suppi' Kaul, my Commanding Officer (CO), testing and using the new Vinten cameras recently fitted on our aircraft. That exposure was invaluable and helped remove the fear of the unknown to a great extent.



Sabres at Dhaka Airfield, photo courtesy www.PAFwallpapers.com.

As the Unit Adjutant, I briefed the airmen on the situation and the expected precautions and black out measures, etc., before proceeding back to the Officers' Mess. After a light dinner, I went to bed early, so as to be fresh for the 0430 hrs briefing at the Base Operations room the next morning. A number of my colleagues squeezed into my good old Ambassador early next morning and we were there in the Base Operations well in time for the briefing.

The first mission was over Tezgaon airfield in Dhaka, with Suppi as the Mission Leader, Call Sign Mission 501, Flight Lieutenant Billoo Sangar as No. 2, Squadron Leader Allan Mascarenhas (Mascy) as No. 3 and with me as No. 4. I had been Suppi's permanent wingman for a couple of months despite him calling me the Angry Young Man (AYM), but that's a (slightly funny) story for another time. Take off was at 0630 hours for the 181 nautical mile ride one way to Tezgaon and the Time Over Target (ToT) was at 0705 hours IST. The mission was "Counter Air" and the aircraft was configured with all four 100-gallon drop tanks with the four internal Aden guns of 30 mm calibre with 135 rounds each. Even in this configuration, we were some 14 miles beyond our calculated radius of action at low level and thus had no fuel reserve to engage in air combat, should the situation arise.

Considering the numerical superiority we had over the lone Pakistani F-86 Sabre squadron in EP, I had raised this issue and we had debated going with bombs at medium/high levels so that we could engage the PAF Sabres in air combat or bomb the operating surfaces of the airfields. However, this was not accepted initially at higher levels. Since we did not have the gas to engage in air combat, we were briefed to disengage and head home if we were "bounced". Two MiG-21s from Guwahati were tasked to meet us over Dhaka and provide cover during the attack phase.

Coming out of Base Operations to get to the squadron, I found that my old "Amby" had given up on us. The car had a flat, and the spare wheel had already been stolen during a party in Kalchini club earlier. Cursing and muttering, the 6-7 of us set off at a trot for the squadron so as to make it in time for the mission. Just then, Wing Commander Dudley Gomes, the Chief Technical Officer of the base, stopped by in his official Jeep and we piled into his Jeep, hanging from the edges. He literally forced the keys of my Amby from me regardless of my protests. When I came back from the mission, I found the car parked in front of the Flight Commander's office with a note under the wiper blade, like a parking ticket saying *'Keep the spare as long as you need and at least till the war is over'*. Remember, I was only a Flying Officer then and he a Wing Commander, a big man on the base. Why I describe this is to illustrate the camaraderie on the base.

I was just in time for the small pre-mission brief and a cuppa of tea, before we set off to the "Chiefy", Flight Sergeant Chowdhary, for aircraft allotment. In those days, the Chiefy, despite not being a commissioned officer, was the boss of all things technical in the squadron. Chiefy Chowdhary was a greatly respected man. He promptly allotted me my favourite aircraft, BA 291, on which I had carried out most of my reconnaissance missions earlier and the aircraft had always got me back without problems.

We started up from dispersed pens at about 0615 hours to find that Suppi's aircraft did not start and Mascy's aircraft had a hydraulic leak. Suppi quickly jumped into the standby aircraft and, since all the other aircraft were committed to different missions, decided to carry on with three aircraft, with me in the No. 3 position. As we took off on Runway 09, with me taking off last, even old faithful BA 291 let me down and I could not operate my undercarriage switch to raise the landing gear. Since I was limited to a speed of 250 knots, I kept falling back farther and farther behind the formation while trying to retract the undercarriage. Fortunately, visibility was literally unlimited and I could keep them in sight for a long time as specks. Finally, I kind of instinctively decided to use the override switch, which was not normally permitted, since this was



A Pakistani Sabre Jet

an operational mission and raised the undercarriage at the risk of not being able to lower it for landing.

Soon, I was in position as No. 3 on Suppi's left abreast at about 1500 yards while Billoo maintained 200 yards from Suppi on his right, in battle formation. The day was beautiful, with unlimited visibility while we cruised along the planned route with little tactical routing due to fuel constraints. However, low clouds off the ground mist appeared as we entered the plains of EP South of Tura in the low Khasi Hills. These low clouds made us visible for miles to anyone looking for us from above but, fortunately, started thinning close to the target. About two minutes short of Tezgaon, as we left the Initial Point (IP) at 420 knots for the run to the Pull Up Point (PUP), hugging the deck at or below 100 feet, I spotted two Sabres on the right at 3 O'clock high at about 5 miles. As I reported this, Suppi called up the MiG-21s from Guwahati who were supposed to meet us directly over Tezgaon airfield to cover us while we concentrated on the attack. The MiG Leader asked Suppi for our position so that they could come and help. While this conversation of 'where are you' was going on with no visual contact between the MiGs and us, the two Sabres closed in from 3 O'clock to 6 O'clock (astern) position in a neat guided right turn. The Sabre in the lead came behind Suppi and Billoo at about 2500 yards, with the other one moving in behind me, visible to me only in my rear view mirror. This neat turn into the interception confirmed that it was under the guidance of ground radar, which meant that the PAF had moved their low looking AR-1 radar North of Dhaka, the expected path of approach of IAF aircraft.

We had perhaps been unintentionally accelerating, and were flying at about 450 to 480 knots, making it difficult for the Sabres to close in. The R/T was thick with calls between Suppi and MiGs to make visual contact with each other. I was keeping an eye on both the Sabres. The lead Sabre had closed in to about 2000 yards to Suppi, when I saw a white plume under the belly of the Sabre. While this was actually the fuel swirl due to the Sabre jettisoning his drop tanks in an effort to close the distance further, I thought that he had launched a Sidewinder missile since we had been briefed by Intelligence that some of the PAF Sabres had been modified to carry the Sidewinders.

Instinctively, I ordered tactical action with a hard right turn, and, in my eagerness to get to the Sabre behind Suppi, while continuing to look out for the one behind me, I "hauled" 8 G or more. While my neck was hurting from the effort of craning under this g-load, I think I caught the Sabres by surprise, especially the one behind me, since I saw him sliding out of my turn, unable to cut inside to close the distance and threaten me. The Sabre behind Suppi & Billoo turned slightly left towards me to cross me safely at high angle off to avoid a passing shot at him. As expected, after about 90 degrees of turn, I lost contact with Suppi & Billoo under my belly and continued turning through about 170 degrees to the homeward Northerly course of 350 degrees.

Rolling out on 350 degrees as briefed, so as to disengage, I initially did not pick up Suppi or Billoo where I expected them to be, left abreast of me. I asked Suppi for his position and whether he had contact with me. Looking further back, I found two Hunters in a lazy turn deep at about 0730 O'clock to me with a Sabre 300 to 400 yards behind them, and firing his guns, confirmed by puffs of black smoke from his nose.

I yelled, *"Hard right, he is firing at you"* and mindless of the fuel and the instructions not to engage, hauled my aircraft into a hard left followed by a sharp reversal to the right to get behind this Sabre. Due to the lower speed that these three aircraft were at, I quickly found myself at about 400 yards from the Sabre in a right turn with about 3 to 4 g, with my gun-sight aiming index (pipper) right on the Sabre's cockpit.

All this had been practiced in mock combat so many times in peace-time. Unfortunately, the same peace-time habits made me press the camera button for a fraction of a second, instead of the gun trigger, leaving me wondering why my guns were not firing. Cursing myself for

this stupidity, I lowered the gun-trigger by which time, due to the high closing-in speed and being inside the turn, I found myself at less than 100 yards from the Sabre. The Sabre was so close now that he filled more than my entire front windshield. At this point, the Sabre sharply reversed to the left, perhaps on being warned by the one behind me. In this reversal, I put the aiming cross on the Sabres's spine around the right wing-root and pressed the trigger. This time, my aircraft shuddered with all four guns firing, and the Sabre just blew up in front of me. Before I could even think of evasive action from all the debris, I flew right through the center of the explosion, yelling on the R/T, **"I got him"**. I immediately got a call from one of the MiGs announcing that the Sabre pilot had ejected.

Fortunately, with all the debris flying outwards, and because I flew through the center, I did not hear any sound or feel any debris striking my aircraft. There was no time to dwell on this or even look inside to see if all systems were functioning correctly due to the Sabre last seen lurking behind me. I went into a hard turn to the right, looking for this second Sabre inside the turn while asking Suppi to continue turn and roll out on 350 degrees. After rolling out on this course for home, I did not see anyone again, including Suppi. Later, I established that both Suppi and Billoo were safe and already on their way home. Due to my initial problem with the undercarriage and after this engagement with the Sabres, I was now even lower on fuel. So, after a couple of minutes at low level and high speed, I zoomed up to about 15,000 feet and dropped to "range" speed while mentally calculating if I could get home with the remaining fuel. Fortunately, I had just enough.

From 15,000 feet and less than 100 lbs of fuel on the gauge, I set my engine to idle and made an approach for the reciprocal RW 27, prepared to glide to a landing if the engine "flamed out". However, I managed to land with the engine still with me, and with the fuel gauges indicating EMPTY.

As I taxied old faithful BA 291 into the blast pen, I found half the squadron had gathered there, cheering and waving. I also found Squadron Leader Nanda Cariappa, Station Flight Safety Officer as well as CO of 111 Helicopter Unit (HU) there in his Jeep for me. Obviously, Suppi had already told Chiefy about the events of the morning. My anti-G suit and flying overall were soaking wet from all the sweat and excitement, despite the winter morning. I did a quick visual check of the aircraft and satisfied myself that there was not a scratch on it. After a bear hug from the Chiefy (against all protocols), the airmen lifted me up on their shoulders and deposited me into the jeep of Nanda Cariappa. We proceeded to the flight complex, with the men following, cheering loudly. I found Suppi and Billoo waiting out in the verandah. Giving me a hug, Suppi said, "Thank God, you got back safe". I also got a hot cuppa in my hands and some food into my belly to get the sugar levels going again.

Having seen the Sabre firing from close quarters on a Hunter, I was expecting to see battle damage on the aircraft of Suppi or Billoo. However, it was mystifying when I found neither of their aircraft had suffered any hits, nor had they seen any Sabre. We had little time to discuss the R/T problems as we had to start preparing for our subsequent missions.

The mystery was resolved a little later, when we heard that Buster Bains, my course mate in the sister squadron (17 Squadron) had come back from his mission with 42 bullet holes. Fortunately, his aircraft kept flying despite failure of multiple systems and he nursed the aircraft all the way back to base. The Sabres reportedly used "Ball" ammunition and not "High Explosive" ammunition, which resulted in the ammo piercing the aircraft structure but not causing any explosion. The 17 Squadron mission, flown by Squadron Leader Lele, Buster, Nebb and Bajwa, was also tasked for Dhaka, with a Time over Target just two minutes behind us. As soon as he got back from the mission, Buster told everyone in his squadron that "Khappe" (my nick name) got the Sabre behind him.

The only logical explanation was that somewhere during the engagement, their formation telescoped into ours. The lazy turn by the Hunters and the Sabre behind Buster fit with my story, as did the call I made about having got the Sabre after which Buster stopped feeling any more hits.

Chiefy Chowdhary later told me that I had only fumes in my fuel tanks when I switched off. Also, that my aircraft had only fired 18 rounds from all four guns or less than 5 rounds per gun, which amounted to a burst of a quarter second or so.

The next morning we went Sabres hunting with eight aircraft, four each from 37 and 17 squadrons with our formation the same four. However, the Sabres never came to meet us and by 5th night, the runways of Tezgaon and Kurmitola, at Dhaka, had been busted by MiGs so I never saw a Sabre in the air again during the war.



Air Marshal Harish Masand, *VrC, VM (Retd) was commissioned as a fighter pilot in December 1967. He was awarded a Vir Chakra for gallantry for the air actions in 1971 War. In his distinguished career, he has inducted the MiG-29 as a Squadron Commander in 1987 and the Su-30s as the Base Commander in 1997. A DSSC graduate and a flying instructor, he has served as an instructor in most establishments. He is also an alumnus of the Air War College in USA. After retirement in 2006, he settled down in Mhow, writing and speaking on defence and national security matters.*



Five Hunter Fighters at a UK Airbase ready for delivery to India, photo courtesy bharatrakshak.com.

THE 1971 AIR WAR – A Naval Aviator Reminisces

This article gives an insight into fighter pilots heroism and risk taking, as they fly into enemy airspace and execute challenging missions. The leadership epitomised by the Commanding Officer is also worth noting.

I contracted the naval-aviation 'bug', as a schoolboy, on reading James Michener's short novel about the Korean War titled **Bridges at Toko-ri.** Later, after seeing William Holden as a dashing aviator, in the Hollywood version of the book, I made up my mind to become a carrier-pilot; never mind that this juvenile resolve pre-dated the arrival of our first carrier by a full five years! The path was long and arduous, but a decade after leaving school, I achieved my ambition in July 1969, when I first landed on the deck of INS Vikrant, in a Sea Hawk jet-fighter.

Life on the aircraft-carrier, as a squadron pilot, was busy and exciting because there was a lot to learn about flying at sea. Apart from air-defence of the fleet, we practiced anti-shipping strikes, weapon-firing, ground-attack and photo-reconnaissance. But most thrilling were catapult-assisted take-off (termed 'launch') and the landing, which involved the aircraft hook engaging wires on the deck (termed 'recovery').

I had just settled down and begun to enjoy Vikrant's hectic flying routine, when I received orders to proceed for a two-year 'exchange posting' with the Indian Air Force (IAF). I bade a reluctant goodbye to my squadron-mates and departed for Jamnagar, where I was to undergo conversion to the Hunter ground-attack fighter, before joining my new squadron. The Hunter was a bigger, faster and more powerful descendant of

the Sea Hawk and a great joy to fly.

On completion of conversion in end-1970, I reported to my new unit, No. 20 Squadron IAF (nom de guerre, the 'Lightnings'), based in Hindon, close to Delhi. A thousand kilometres from the sea, I felt like a fish out of water, but my new squadron-mates, made me feel quite at home as a part of the 'Lightning' family.

No. 20 Squadron was commanded by Wing Commander (later Air Vice Marshal) CV Parker, an accomplished flyer and an outstanding officer. I soon found that although the 'Boss' was a martinet at work, he and Mrs Parker had knit the squadron into a close and happy family. I earned 'fully-operational' status on the Hunter within a few months.

As 1971 wore on, crew-room conversation invariably, veered to happenings in East Pakistan. We watched, initially with schadenfreude, and then with growing concern, as Pakistan, riven by political and ethnic differences between its Punjabi-dominated Western Wing and its Bengali Eastern Wing, marched inexorably towards civil-war. Despite growing tensions, we all knew that no military action was likely till after the monsoons.

Around mid-1971, the squadron was re-located from Hindon to Pathankot. Our new base was located just two to three minutes flying time from the international border and would certainly be an exciting place when the 'balloon' went up. During the prevailing lull, Wingco Parker, the Commanding Officer (CO) put the squadron through a rigorous training programme for its wartime role of 'counter-air' operations, which involved attacking the enemy's air-power assets and degrading his ability to interfere with our own operations. Given its range and payload, the Hunter was an ideal platform for this role.

From Mondays to Fridays, we would practice low-level navigation, weapon-delivery and air-combat. On Saturdays, we would gather in the CO's office to receive intelligence briefings on prospective targets in West Pakistan. We were made to memorise, routeing information, enemy defences, and target details from aerial photographs. We also received instructions on 'escape and evasion,' to avoid capture in enemy territory.



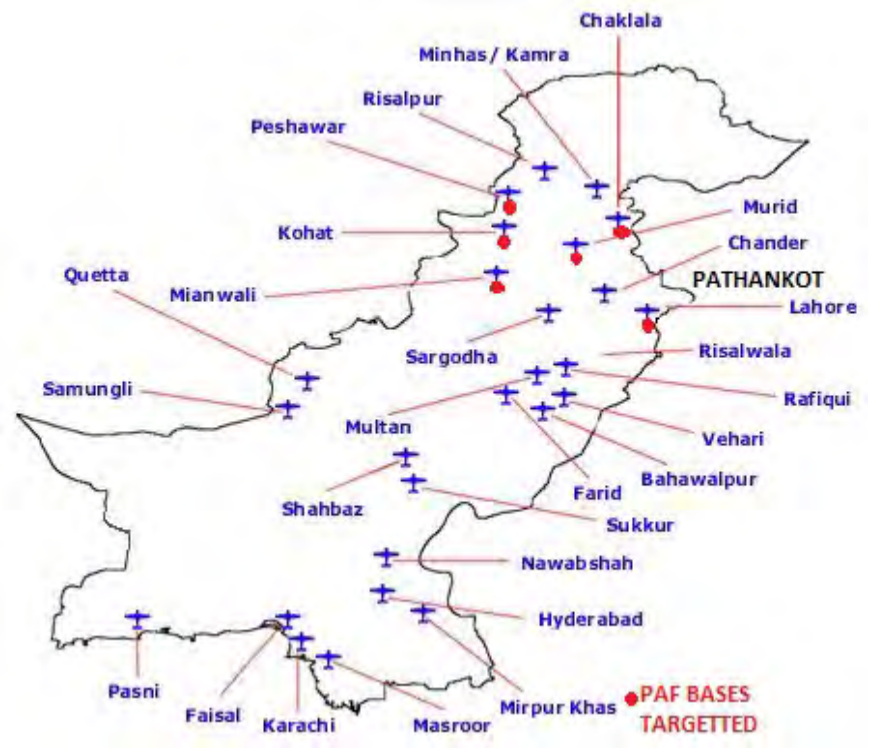
Lt (IN) Arun Prakash, centre, with colleagues at IAF No 20 Squadron.

I realised that the major factor underpinning the divergence in standard operating procedures (SOP) of the IAF and naval aviation (in the 1970s era) was air-threat. Since most of its air-bases were within strike range of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), the IAF's main preoccupation was the ever-present air threat from fighters and bombers. The aircraft-carrier, on the other hand, being a mobile platform, could safely undertake flying operations, while remaining outside enemy air-strike range, where the only air-threat was of detection by maritime patrol aircraft.

IAF bases, thus, had fighters, either in readiness, on the ground, or in the air as a CAP (combat air patrol), at dawn and dusk. The carrier needed such measures only occasionally. Naval aviation tactics and SOPs were, therefore somewhat different from the IAF. However, it was difficult to be optimistic about the outcome of an encounter between the first-generation Sea Hawk and PAF's trans-sonic F-86 Sabre.

Everyone assumed that war would commence only on a full-moon night, to enable effective employment of bombers and armoured forces. To avoid becoming 'sitting ducks' for a PAF pre-emptive strike (as happened in 1965), every full moon phase saw the squadron retiring to a rear base. Since 2nd December 1971 was a full-moon night, on 25th November the Boss sent us off to Hindon, via Ambala, while he decided to stay back in Pathankot.

Sure enough, on the evening of Friday 3rd December, PAF fighters carried out a 'pre-emptive' strike on nine Indian air bases. At midnight, we huddled around a transistor radio, to listen to Mrs Gandhi: *"I speak to you at a moment of grave peril … soon after 5:30 PM on 3rd December, Pakistan launched full scale war against us…"* We were up at 3.30 am, on a bitterly cold morning, to find the Hindon air base blacked-out



(PAF Airbases, photo credit defence.pk)

and covered in dense fog! In sections of two to three aircraft, we made a low-level dash for Pathankot, in order to commence retaliatory action against PAF bases.

After landing in Pathankot, I was startled to see the Boss and his wingman, Flight Lieutenant Dhillon, purposefully striding towards their aircraft. Exercising his prerogative as CO, he had decided to lead the Lightnings' first strike on PAF base Peshawar – deep inside Pakistan. Since I was the designated 'Squadron Diarist,' I reproduce a brief description of his mission:

"Mission 15 rolled at 0643, and following a pre-planned low-level profile, reached Peshawar on schedule. As Boss went in for an attack on two parked Sabres, No.2, while firing on a fuel dump, called out, 'Three Sabres, high!' The Hunter pair opened out westwards, came back for a second attack, and then departed for home, at tree-top level, leaving a pall of smoke from burning aircraft and fuel dumps. Unknown to them, the enemy CAP had followed them, and 3-4 minutes on the homebound leg, they were both attacked by PAF Sabres. As per SOP, the pair split and fought off the attackers in a fierce dogfight in the heart of enemy territory. With their guns empty, and fuel running low, the pair headed for home at full throttle. Boss landed with 22 bullet-holes in his aircraft and Dhillon's engine flamed-out on final approach. Mission 15 completed successfully."

Boss having set the agenda, the squadron followed with nine days of intensive 'counter-air operations', in which we attacked PAF bases at Peshawar, Kohat, Chaklala, Mianwali, Murid, Walton and Chak-Jhumra; the radar station at Sakesar and oil refinery at Attock, while interdicting targets of opportunity. Then we switched roles and for the next seven days flew army close-support missions in the Chhamb, Poonch, Nowshera and Sialkot sectors.

The squadron's tally included 17 PAF aircraft destroyed on the ground and one in the air, in addition to destruction of PAF fuel and ammunition dumps as well as hangars and other airfield installations. Damage and casualties were inflicted on Pakistani infantry, armour and artillery with bombs, rockets, guns and napalm. Two of our pilots were killed in action, and the squadron ended the war with the highest number of gallantry awards in the IAF. Wing Commander Parker led us all the way, ensuring that he flew a mission or two, every single day. As I conclude this account, I relate one amongst the many of the squadron's tales of heroism and sacrifice during the war.

5th December brought a complex but exciting mission; a 4-aircraft strike on PAF base Mianwali, coordinated with a 2-aircraft attack on Sakesar radar. Reported to be a 'harbour' for Mirage III and B-57 bombers, Mianwali involved running the gauntlet of PAF fighters from bases like Murid, Sargodha and Risalewala, which lay enroute. The powerful Sakesar radar, located just 30 miles East of Mianwali on a high mountain peak was a key component of PAF air-defence. Since Mianwali and Sakesar provided mutual support, we assumed that PAF would mount a single CAP over both.

About 250 miles inside Pakistan, Mianwali was at the limit of the Hunter's range, but I wasn't too worried since Boss was to lead the mission and I was No. 4 in the formation. The Flight Commander, Squadron Leader Jal Mistry was to lead the Sakesar mission. However, the plan started unraveling rapidly. Of the six Hunters, two failed to start and one had to land back, soon after take-off. Of the remaining three, Flying Officer Balasubramaniam became 'leader' of the Mianwali mission, with me as his (rather worried) wingman, and Squadron Leader Mistry, boldly, deciding to press-on – all by himself - with the Sakesar mission.

My worry was uncalled for, because young Bala assumed the lead with great aplomb, descended to deck-level, and set course. While he focused on precise low-level navigation, I kept a sharp lookout for enemy fighters. On reaching a pre-planned position, Bala and I 'split' and pulled-up, to attack from different directions. The Mianwali runway lay before us, with a C-130 Hercules transport loading troops in the dispersal. I gave it a long burst of 30 mm fire, while Bala blasted an aircraft pen and saw it emitting smoke.

There was plenty of anti-aircraft fire but strangely no enemy fighters overhead. Making a high-speed exit from Mianwali,

> Good leadership is all about alleviating the fear of those whom you lead. For me, the most important lesson of the war came from the Squadron Commander's courage and professionalism.

in an Easterly direction, I was joining up with Bala, when Squadron Leader Jal Mistry's voice came on the radio: "Look out for me chaps. I'm in same area." A few minutes later, we flew over Sakesar and gave the radar a long burst of cannon fire, in passing.

Nothing further was ever heard from Jal Mistry, but in his 2017 book, **'In the Ring and on its Feet,'** PAF historian Air Commodore Kaiser Tufail, writes: *"…a lone intrepid Hunter was able to sneak in for another successful attack on Sakesar, adding to the earlier damage …. the Hunter was intercepted by two Mirages from Mianwali."* Hit by cannon-fire and then by a missile, according to Tufail, *"…the pilot ejected. But it was too late. Squadron Leader Jal Maneksha Mistry of No. 20 Squadron was found fatally injured."*

The Mirages were the combat air patrol that left the air base while we were attacking it, and came to defend Sakesar radar. By the time we crossed Sakesar on our return leg, they must have returned to base. Squadron Leader Jal Mistry's outstanding gallantry in venturing alone, deep into Pakistan and taking on the Mirage CAP, had allowed Bala and me to return home safely. Jal Mistry's Vir Chakra (posthumous), was very well-deserved; as was Bala's.

The war taught me many lessons about human nature. One had to come to terms with fear, that arose from many sources. Butterflies fluttered in the stomach as one crossed into enemy territory; one cast frequent glances over the shoulder to check for enemy fighters; flashes of anti-aircraft fire quickened the heartbeat; and in the background, fear of being shot down and taken a prisoner of war. The worst fear of all was, however, that of failing to complete your mission.

Good leadership is all about alleviating the fear of those whom you lead. For me, the most important lesson of the war came from the Squadron Commander's courage and professionalism. By his fearless personal conduct throughout the war, he set an example that inspired us to follow him into action. At the same time, our biggest fear was about not letting the squadron down. The overpowering worry about 'what will the Boss say' drove out our lesser fears, and we dared not fail in our mission. This was by personal gallantry and leadership by example. Wing Commander Parker was awarded a richly deserved Maha Vir Chakra for his leadership during the war.

Naval Consulting Editor's Note: I feel "compelled" to add a few things here! Admiral Arun Prakash was and continues to be a role model for thousands of officers in the Indian Navy across a few generations. I count myself one such having seen him as my captain when he was Commander Arun Prakash, VrC as CO, INS Beas in 1980 and then in later years and now when both of us are veterans. It is his innate humility, self-effacement, and generous spirit that he "failed" to mention that he was awarded a Vir Chakra for gallantry in the same 1971 war. What's more, he was recommended for it by the IAF! For all readers of Medals & Ribbons, an article he wrote with characteristic modesty and humour was how he came to know that he had ruined Brigadier General Chuck Yeager's (USAF, retired) day in the same war. Do read, **"How I crossed swords with Chuck Yeagar",** http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1971war/1278-chuck-yeager.html#gsc.tab=0. It is an elegantly written story, with humility, humour and an innate sense of honour.



Admiral Arun Prakash, *PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM (Retd) was born in a military family in October 1944. An alumnus of NDA, he was commissioned into the Indian Navy in 1966. Trained as a naval aviator, he served on India's first aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. During the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, he served with the No. 20 Squadron IAF and was awarded the Vir Chakra for leading airstrikes deep into enemy territory. He has commanded INS Chatak, the naval squadron INAS 300, INS Vindhyagiri, INS Viraat and the naval air station INS Hansa in Goa. After promotion to Flag rank, his notable appointments include Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet, Commandant NDA, Chief of Personnel at Naval HQ and Commander-in-Chief Andaman and Nicobar Command. He subsequently had stints as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Western Naval Command and Vice Chief of the Naval Staff before taking over as the Chief of the Naval Staff from 31 July 2004 to 31 October 2006. He is one of India's most decorated naval officers.*



Pilots scrambling for their Gnats at Srinagar, photo courtesy puneetspage.wordpress.com/tag/iaf Inset. Cadet Sekhon (right) during an excursion

SCRAMBLE :
Sabres Over Srinagar

A tribute to a valiant pilot who took off from Srinagar Airfield while under attack by Pakistani fighter jets, and showed tremendous mettle and courage in downing two enemy Sabre jets.

Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon was born to Shri Tarlok Singh Sekhon and Smt Harbans Kaur on 17 July 1945 in village Issewal Dakha, Ludhiana, Punjab. He grew up in the vicinity of Air Force Base Halwara, near Ludhiana. Since his childhood, Nirmal Jit was fascinated with aircraft and the Air Force way of life. His father was serving in the Indian Air Force (IAF), which deepened his desire to join the IAF.

After school, he enrolled at the Dayalbagh Engineering College, Agra, but dropped out to join the IAF and was commissioned on 04 June 1967 as a fighter pilot. After initial training, he joined No. 18 Squadron in October 1968, which operated the Folland Gnat aircraft. 18 Squadron AF was called the Flying Bullets, because of the speed and tiny size of the Gnats. The motto of the squadron, "Teevra Aur Nirbhay" described the characteristics of the squadron, Swift and Fearless. The squadron was based at Ambala (Haryana) during the run up to the 1971 war. The squadron was assigned the responsibility of air defence of the Kashmir valley.

In compliance with the conditions of the 1948 ceasefire, India had not stationed fighter aircraft at Srinagar air base during peacetime. After the outbreak of hostilities, a component of 18 Squadron moved to Srinagar on 'detachment' to undertake the air defence task. From the plains of Haryana/Punjab, into the

freezing, snow covered rugged mountainous terrain was a big change and a challenge for man and machine.

Unlike other fighter squadrons of IAF, which had two or more twin seater aircraft (trainer aircraft) for training of pilots, the Gnat squadrons did not have any twin seater aircraft, only single seaters. A new entrant was required to familiarise himself with the cockpit layout, viz., the controls, various knobs, switches, warning lights, etc. Once proficient in this, he would be strapped up in the cockpit as if for a sortie. The tail of the aircraft would be pushed down by some able bodied airmen, to raise the nose to show the pilot the 'take-off altitude', the 'landing altitude', and the 'tail touch altitude'. The pilot was expected to note visual cues during this demonstration, to help him take off, land and avoid touching his tail. To get a feel of the power and rate of acceleration, a 'taxy run' would follow. The pilot lined up on the runway and proceeded as for a take off. After accelerating to a pre-briefed speed, he would cut the throttle and thus learn the peculiarities of decelerating the aircraft. After that, he flew a couple of sorties in the Hawker Hunter twin seater. The only thing that was common between the Hunter and the Gnat was probably their parentage, both being of British origin. For what it was worth, they flew these sorties, which would give them a very rough idea what the Gnat would feel like during the 'approach to land' and the landing. On successful completion, the pilot was considered ready for being launched solo. Colleagues who have flown the Gnat recall how the first take off felt like being catapulted into the sky, and before they knew it, they were at 10,000 feet or more! However, once a pilot got some hours on the Gnat under his belt, she was a fighter pilots' dream, they insist!





(Left) Folland Gnats in formation. (Right) Statue of Flying Officer NJS Sekhon, PVC at Ludhiana

During the 1965 Indo – Pakistan war, the Gnat had earned the sobriquet of "Sabre Slayer" for the number of Sabres shot down by this aircraft. Flying Officer Sekhon loved the Gnat. His heroes were the Keelor brothers, Trevor and Denzil, both Gnat pilots, who had shot down a Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Sabre apiece during the 1965 war, for which they were awarded the Vir Chakra.

Situated in a bowl, Srinagar airbase is surrounded by high mountains. Surveillance radars, which kept a look out for enemy aircraft as well as guided own fighters, were not very effective in such terrain. The raiders would mask their approach behind the mountains. Approaching the Srinagar bowl, they would skim over the mountain tops or enter through valley passes, and duck low once again to avoid or delay detection. OPs (Observation Posts) had been set up at various vantage points in the valley, to report any aircraft movement. Observers were required to look out for aircraft, identify them, and report to the air base on their radio sets. This was an imperfect system, and a lot depended on the weather conditions, the time of the day, the proficiency of the observers, etc. Their report barely gave a few minutes of warning to the base. Winter fog in the early mornings prevented IAF aircraft from keeping a Combat Air Patrol airborne, especially at dawn which was the most likely time for an air raid. Detection and interception of PAF fighters in the Kashmir valley was hence extremely challenging. The runway would be bombarded at times, but would soon get repaired, thanks to an efficient Garrison Engineer.

26 Squadron PAF, based at Peshawar and operating the F-86 Sabre, was assigned the task of carrying out raids on Srinagar airfield. Early morning on 14th December 71, 26 Squadron of PAF launched yet another raid on Srinagar airfield. Six Sabres got airborne from Peshawar; four of them carried two 500 lb bombs each and gun ammunition, while two 'escort' aircraft carried drop tanks and gun ammunition, their primary task being to provide 'top cover' to the raiders during their bombing attack. The Sabres made their way to Srinagar, remaining undetected till just a few kilometres short. Reaching their Pull Up Point Southeast of the runway, they pulled up and rolled into their attack. The 'escorts' set up a loose orbit overhead, for providing top cover.

The two pilots on 'alert' duty at Srinagar were Flight Lieutenant BS Ghuman (G-Man) and Flying Officer NJS Sekhon (Brother). The weather in the Srinagar bowl was foggy, with poor visibility. The pilots on 'alert' had actually been released from 'readiness', but told to hang around "just in case". Suddenly, the air raid warning was sounded. A raid had been spotted by OPs a few kilometres from Srinagar, and a 'Scramble' was ordered.

Ghuman and Sekhon reacted swiftly to the scramble order, starting up their aircraft and moving out for take off. However, they were held up at the runway due to a communication problem with the Air Traffic Control. Since there was no clearance forthcoming from the ATC, Ghuman on his own initiative opened throttle and took off and Sekhon followed suit. Even as they were taking off, bombs had started falling on the runway. In spite of the risk, they pressed on with the take off.

After take off, Ghuman had turned left, climbing high to get into an advantageous position with respect to the

raiders. But due to the fog and poor visibility, he could not make 'visual contact' with the aircraft below him.

As Sekhon lifted off, the first pair of Sabres, who had just dropped their bombs, were directly ahead of him. But the second pair was behind. Sekhon immediately went into the "attack" mode. His passionate yell on R/T, *"2 Bandits ahead of me, chhodoonga nahi!",* made his intention clear - despite the odds, he was not backing off.

A CAP Controller (Combat Air Patrol Controller) is a pilot who takes position at a vantage point on the airfield, with a clear, all round view. He has a radio set with a pre-designated radio frequency (different from the Air Traffic Control frequency). He guides the interceptor pilots on Radio / Telephony to make 'contact' with the raiders using pre-briefed landmarks on the ground as references, which are easily identifiable from the air.

The CAP Controllers that morning were Flying Officer GM David (Hooch) and Flying Officer Y Singh (Yogi). The smoke, dust and debris of the exploding bombs added to the already poor visibility, and obscured their vision. Consequently, they were unable to keep visual contact with the aircraft engaged in combat and unable to provide any assistance to Sekhon. Ghuman could not be 'vectored' to the combat taking place below him, because of the poor visibility and the fluid position of the aircraft in combat. He also could not provide any assistance to Sekhon. Flying Officer Sekhon was alone, to handle the raiders all by himself.

The second pair of raiders, having dropped their bombs, found the first pair of Sabres being pursued by a Gnat. Sabre 3 started manoeuvring to close in on the Gnat. Sekhon was aware of the situation, which he described on R/T thus, *"I am in a circle of joy, but with two Sabres. I am getting behind one, the other one is getting an edge on me".* He was getting 'sandwiched' between two Sabres. This was a classic situation in which a formation member would have been invaluable, and literally made the difference between survival and death.

Pilots are trained to resort to "last ditch" manoeuvres, to get out of sticky situations. From his actions and the R/T calls, it did not appear as if Sekhon even entertained the thought. His intention and entire focus was to persist in his attack and bring down the adversary, even if it meant putting himself in harm's way.

Squadron mates who were watching the air combat from the ground, recount seeing a Gnat chasing two Sabres, the Gnat firing on a Sabre and the Sabre going out of control with the right wing on fire, trailing thick smoke.

In the air, the Pakistani escort leader who was orbiting overhead, had a clear view of the combat taking place below. He saw the Gnat following the first two Sabres. He *"watched in astonishment as the Gnat snatched degrees at a dizzying rate".* He saw Sabre 3 position himself behind the Gnat, firing his guns. Seeing the Sabre's advantageous position behind the Gnat, the escort leader believed that this was going to end soon. To his bewilderment, he heard Sabre 3 call out that he was out of ammunition. The F-86 Sabre had six guns and a capacity of 1800 rounds of 0.5 inch ammunition, enough to cause a lot of damage and destruction. The situation was getting sticky for the raiders and so the escorts joined the fight. The escort leader manoeuvred to position himself behind the Gnat, firing his guns at him. Even in this situation, Flying Officer Sekhon was not letting go. He called out on R/T, *"I think I am hit. G-Man, come and get them".*

The 37 bullet hits that his aircraft had sustained caused damage to some critical aircraft systems. His aircraft pitched down uncontrollably from a very low height. His canopy was seen to fly off, as he seemed to attempt a last-minute ejection, but he was far too low. He couldn't survive the attempt.

Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon willingly made the supreme sacrifice fighting for his country. He was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest wartime gallantry award. His citation concludes thus; **"The sublime heroism, supreme gallantry, flying skill and determination, above and beyond the call of duty, displayed by Flying Officer Sekhon in the face of certain death, set new heights to Air Force traditions."** The sacrifices made by Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon Param Vir Chakra and his likes should never be forgotten by any Indian.

"To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late;
And how can man die better than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods"

'Horatius at the Bridge'
by Thomas Babington Macaulay



Air Marshal Harpal Singh, *PVSM, AVSM, VM (Retd) was commissioned as a fighter pilot in June 1980. He has about 2500 hours of flying experience mainly on MiG 21, MiG 23, MiG 27 and MiG 29 aircraft. He has commanded a MiG 29 Squadron and has also been a Chief Operations Officer at an Air Force Station. He has commanded two Air Force Stations in the West and East respectively. Besides his DSSC Course, he has also attended the Senior Officers Course at National Institute of Defence Studies, Japan. He has been the Deputy Commandant College of Air Warfare (CAW) and has held important appointments in the strategic arena. He was Director General (Inspection and Safety) of the IAF till his superannuation in May 2019.*



Damaged Government House Dhaka after the air attacks

TARGET : GOVERNMENT HOUSE DHAKA

Strategic Strike, Psychological Effect

The bombing of Government House in Dhaka on 14 December by several strike packages of the Indian Air Force (IAF) was a tactical operation, but had strategic outcomes. A classic example of psychological pressures being applied on the decision makers.

On 14th December 1971, an alert Corporal of the IAF working in a small electronic surveillance unit monitoring the air waves between West Pakistan and East Pakistan (EP) picked up some unusual activity. Unlike much of the routine communication, this conversation was encrypted, for which he had to use a decoding card to listen and record the conversation. Moreover, it was intercepted on one of the identified "strategic" frequencies. The Corporal apprised Flight Lieutenant M L Bala at 1045 hours. The audio conversation was about a meeting to be held a little later the same day, chaired by the Governor of EP, Dr. AM Malik. It also mentioned the names of the officials attending this meeting, which included the top military and civilian leadership.[i]

The war was at a stage where the encirclement of Dhaka, while inevitable, was still in progress. At New Delhi, the top leadership surmised that a meeting of this nature may possibly discuss whether to fight on or to stop. The decision-makers felt that the enemy could be influenced into stopping further fighting. HQ Eastern Air Command was instructed to attack the venue when the meeting was being held and Air Force Stations Guwahati and Hasimara were tasked to execute the air attacks.

Attack by the MiGs

28 Squadron, flying the MiG 21 aircraft was operating from Air Force Station, Guwahati.[ii] Wing Commander BS Bishnoi, the Commanding Officer (CO), had just returned from a Close Air Support mission to Maynamati cantonment, when the Station Commander, Group Captain MSD Wollen came rushing to the Operations Room. He said, "Bhoop, a very critical and urgent task has come from Air HQ. There is a very important meeting going on at Circuit House, Dhaka and this building is to be attacked at 1120 hrs." [iii]

It was already 1055 hours and flying time to Dhaka was 21 minutes, barely giving them any time. Also, they had no idea where the Circuit House was located. The Station Commander produced a tourist map of Dhaka and pointed out the Circuit House, located in a densely populated area of Dhaka. Wing Commander Bishnoi borrowed the map from him, to look for the Circuit House after getting airborne.

The four aircraft formation was led by Wing Commander Bishnoi, and Flight Lieutenants Vinod Bhatia, Raghavachari and Malhi as formation members. Their aircraft were loaded with 32 HE (high explosive) rockets each.

[i] Electronic Warfare - The untold story of 1971, by Wg Cdr M L Bala (Retd) (http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/History/1971War/1109-MLBala.html#gsc.tab=0)
[ii] Eagles Over Bangladesh, by PVS Jagan Mohan and Sameer Chopra, pp 329
[iii] Thunder Over Dacca, by Air Vice Marshal BS Bishnoi, VrC & Bar (https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1971war/1271-thunder-over-dacca.html#gsc.tab=0)

Bishnoi had already started the engine when an officer came running towards him, waving a piece of paper. It was from the Station Commander and read, *"Target is Government House, repeat Government House and not Circuit House. Best of luck and good shooting. Mall."*

Bishnoi acknowledged the message, scanning the tourist map to locate the Government House as he taxied out. He did not want to use the R/T to inform the other pilots of the change, to maintain secrecy. Approaching Dhaka, he gave the new target to them, describing the rough location of the target. Bhatia spotted it first at 11 o'clock, 500 yards away. It was a magnificent old styled palatial building with a high dome, situated in the middle of a lush green compound. There were quite a few vehicles inside the entrance gate, indicating a meeting in progress.

After a confirmatory orbit, the formation attacked, taking the Western side of the building from broad side. The formation did two passes each and fired 128 rockets into the Government House. By the second attack smoke and dust could be seen rising from many locations within the Government House. Immediately after the 28 Squadron attack, a two aircraft formation of 4 Squadron also carried out rocket attacks on the Government House.

A short while later, Hunters from Air Force Station Hasimara carried out gun and rocket attacks on the Eastern side of the building. A first person account of Air Marshal Harish Masand, who was a part of the attacking formation, follows in the next column.

Badly shaken by the MiG attacks, the Hunter attacks were the final straw for Malik. Gavin Young, correspondent for the London Observer (who witnessed the events from close up), sent out a story broadcast round the world on wire:

The jets made a shattering row. The ground crashed and heaved outside. 'We are refugees now, too', choked Mr. Malik. Then Malik produced a shaking pen and a sheet of office paper. The ministers mumbled, held on together. The paper was the resignation letter of the Governor, addressed to President Yahya Khan. The raid was still seething around us. Malik, a devout Muslim, said his prayers. That was the end of Government House. That was the end of the Government of East Pakistan.

The IAF's attack, an act of visible, spectacular intimidation, was the last psychological blow to a crumbling regime. The attack shortened the war and a Berlin-like situation entailing bloody street-by-street fighting was prevented.[iv]

- Air Marshal S Harpal Singh (Retd)

Hunters Target the Government House : A First Person Account

The 1971 War for Liberation of Bangladesh was coming to a finale. We had achieved complete air dominance from 7th December, after shooting down three F-86 Sabres in air combat on 4th December besides the three over Boyra on November 22. On the ground, the Indian Army was rapidly tightening the noose around Dhaka.

14th December forenoon. Suppi led three of us to the Base Operations for a briefing on an unexpected mission. It seemed that last minute intelligence inputs indicated that the Pakistani Governor in the East, Dr. Malik, and Lieutenant General AAK Niazi were to hold a meeting with their senior officials in the Governor's House around noon; we were to attack that House to send a message that further resistance was futile. Obviously, we needed to know where exactly that house was, so that we avoided collateral damage and unnecessary civilian casualties. By an amazing stroke of luck, the Base Operations Officer and Major Tripathi pulled out an old tourist street map of Dhaka printed by Burmah Shell and we memorized the location of the House. Meanwhile, four aircraft had been readied and armed with 8xT-10 rockets and 4x135 30mm guns.

Suppi and I took off first as the lead pair, with Squadron Leader AA Bose and Flight Lieutenant KB Menon about 10 minutes later as the second pair. Having done some missions over Dhaka by then, we knew the anti-aircraft fire was very heavy and effective till about 6000 feet and we would have to fly through the flak for the attacks. We cruised out at medium altitude and did an orbit over Dhaka above 6000 feet to spot the target building as also to align ourselves for the attack on the designated conference hall, all this while watching the balls of fire of the flak below us. Swooping down from that height like eagles in a steep dive, we carried out two attacks, the first with rockets and the second with guns, putting our ordnance accurately on the conference hall. I saw all the ordnance go right through the verandah around the conference hall. In the second pass with guns, the charring due to the rockets of the first attack was visible. Thereafter, we exited North hugging the deck at high speeds close to 500 Knots and returned to base safely.

By all accounts, the attack was a great psychological blow on the Pakistani leadership and hastened the surrender of Pakistani Forces in the East, literally as the coup de grace. Lieutenant General 'Shammi' Mehta, then a Major, commanding a PT-76 squadron in the theatre, later called it a *'victory of mind over matter'*.

After the Instrument of Surrender was signed in Dhaka on December 16th, Air Marshal HC Dewan, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Eastern Air Command asked Lieutenant General Niazi why he surrendered though he had the troops to hold out much longer. Niazi, pointing to the wings on Group Captain Chandan Singh's chest, has been quoted as saying, *"This had hastened the surrender. I and my people have had no rest during day or night, thanks to your Air Force. We have changed our quarters ever so often, trying to find a safe place for a little rest and sleep so that we could carry on the fight, but we have been unable to do that"*. When I read that later, I felt proud to have been a part of these raids.

- Air Marshal Harish Masand, VrC, VM (Retd)

[iv] Eagles Over Bangladesh, by PVS Jagan Mohan and Sameer Chopra, pp 336

NAVAL OPERATIONS



Karachi Ablaze



INS Khukri

"50 YEARS AFTER THE 1971 WAR"

Special Commemorative Issue



An OSA Class Missile Boat cuts through the waves

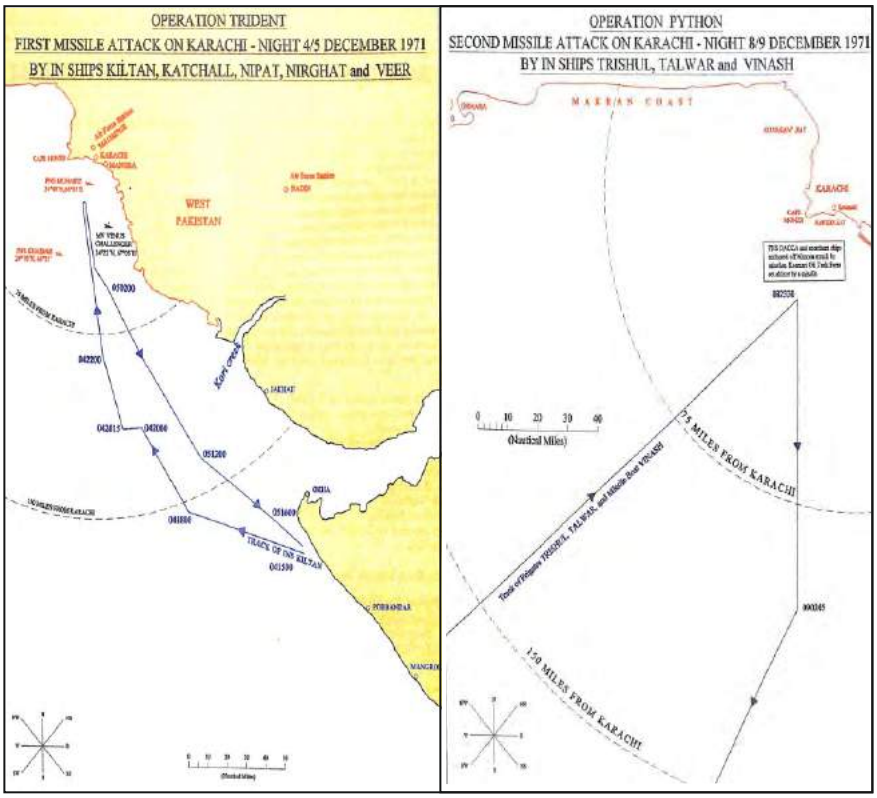
KARACHI ABLAZE

– The Navy's Killer Squadron Strikes

Navy Day is celebrated on 04 December every year as this was the day in 1971 when the Indian Navy missile boats launched an audacious attack on the well guarded Karachi harbour and caused extensive damage. This article describes the preparation, planning and execution of the mission.

During the Indo-Pak War of 1971 for the liberation of Bangladesh, the Indian Navy (IN) fought in two separate theatres and established sea control in both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Its ships and aircraft sank enemy ships, destroyed shore infrastructure and completely dominated the Pakistan Navy (PN). Its effective 'blockade' of both enemy coasts created immense pressure on the Pakistani establishment. Many units and personnel of the Indian Navy (IN) covered themselves with glory. However, the events that most captivated public imagination then, and have remained etched in memory ever since, were the devastating attacks on Karachi on 04 and 08 December 71. Five decades later, we bring alive these operations that were high on imagination, boldness and outcomes.

In the 1965 war, the political leadership assigned the IN a defensive role and directed it not to operate North of Porbandar. This contributed to a furtive raid on Dwarka by the PN. While it was completely inconsequential and caused no damage, it caused a lot of disquiet in the rank and file of the Navy about being deprived of action and the Navy's inherent flexibility not being utilised. Six years later in 1971, the IN rose to the occasion and was not found wanting in offensive action. In the intervening period, the IN had also rapidly increased its manpower and augmented its hardware by acquiring submarines, Petya class corvettes and the Osa class missile boats, all of which played an important role in the war.



Delivering the Knockout Punch

After Pakistan carried out air strikes on 03 December 71, the orders for Operation Trident were despatched to the Fleet at Mumbai and Dwarka where INS Nirghat and Vidyut had been operationally positioned. Operation Trident involved three missile boats (IN Ships Nirghat, Nipat and Veer) and two Petya class ships (Katchall & Kiltan) who were to accompany the missile boats, unleash them at dark to approach Karachi at full speed and execute the missile attacks. They would also maintain a lookout with their superior sensors (radars and sonars). The deployment of the two classes of ships brought tactical synergies. This daring raid resulted in the sinking of PNS Khaiber, PNS Muhafiz, a merchant ship, MV Venus Challenger and setting the Keamari refinery on fire. The success of Operation Trident is celebrated as the Navy Day (04 December) each year with great pride, remembrance and fervour. It was acknowledged as a great military feat by many including Admiral Gorshkov of the Soviet Navy as the Russians themselves had never envisaged this role for the missile boats.

While the IN was quick to get off the blocks on 04 December, it also sustained the momentum by following up with Operation Python on 08 December which caused further destruction of Pakistani assets. This operation involved missile attacks by INS Vinash supported by INS Trishul and INS Talwar. As a consequence, PNS Dacca and MV Harmattan were severely damaged, MV Gulf Star destroyed and Keamari Oil Field was set ablaze once again causing shock waves in Karachi and severely demoralising the PN. The magnitude of devastation was so great and unexpected that PN withdrew its ships into harbour and ordered them to de-ammunition after 08 December. Thus, the maritime war on the Western front was effectively over within five days of the start of hostilities. To further compound their misery, the fear of missile attacks resulted in abandonment of search for survivors and PNS Zulfikar being strafed by its own Air Force.

Backroom Boys and the Run up to the Strikes

Recalling events fifty years after its occurrence is fraught with the dangers of distortion, oversight and is constrained by the availability of records. Minor details get swept away in the wake of time, lapses of memory, or be found bereft of the narratives of the dramatis personae. Often, the events leading up to the iconic moments are over shadowed by their own historically significant outcomes.

While the exploits of the Missile Boat Squadron are relatively well known and ingrained in our memories, less is known about the events that lead to the triumph. As brought out in Commodore Vijay Jerath's book, 70 officers and 230 sailors, comprising the 25th Missile Squadron, were flown from Delhi and Mumbai, to Moscow in end August 1969 to receive training to man the Osa Class boats. From Moscow Airport, they took a 15 hour flight to Khabarovsk, located about five hundred miles north of Vladivostok. Further on, small jets flew them to Vladivostok in batches of 40. After a 45 minute ferry ride, 8 nautical miles off Vladivostok they arrived at the Russki Ostrov (Russian Island) where they spent almost a year till March 1970 getting rigorously trained for handling the 'Wasps'.

It is here in the cold freezing isolated posts that the 'Killer spirit' grew roots. To paraphrase Vice Admiral SCS Bangara, who was a young Lieutenant then, and prospective Executive Officer of INS Veer, *"With nowhere to go and away from families, we had nothing to do but concentrate hard on our training, master tactics and build team spirit"*. Various ways of deployment of these boats were discussed, it was during this phase that the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and tactical exploitation of the 'boats' envisaged. This was the early period of our association with the Russians - the IN was getting used to not just new languages and phrases but also new modes of operational thinking and employment of combat power. The fierce urge to not be seen as letting down our country in foreign lands or to be perceived as any less in tactical acumen resulted in a highly professional Squadron.

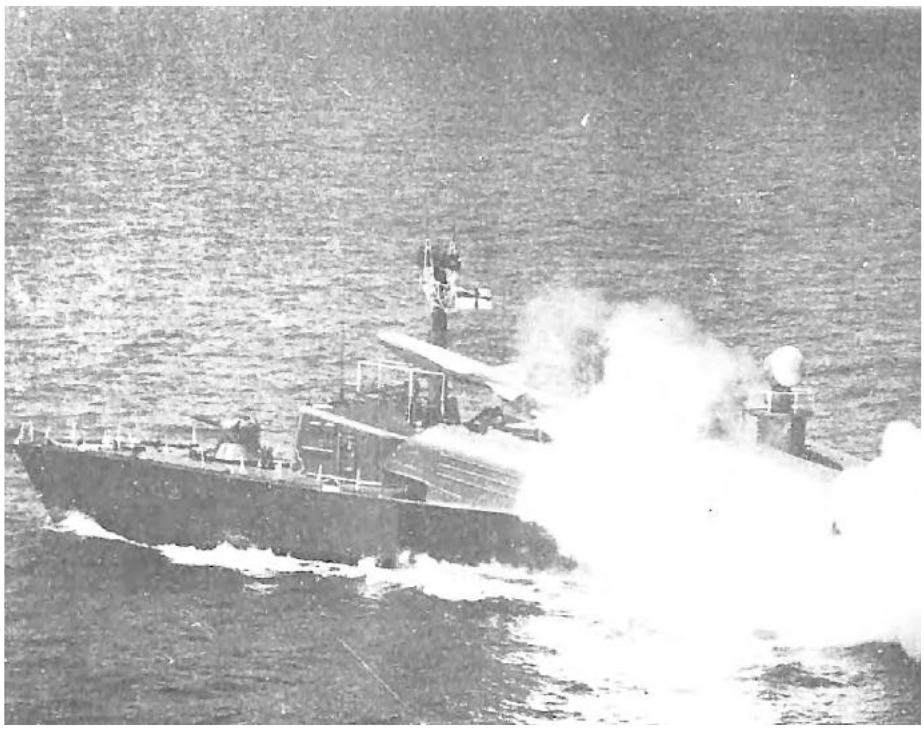
The eight Osa Class boats were then transferred to India by merchant ships. While the boats were to join the Western Fleet at Mumbai, they could be unloaded only at Kolkata as the heaviest quayside crane of 80 tonne capacity was located at Netaji Docks. The present day INS Netaji Subhash was then a small naval unit at INS Hooghly, housing the Warship Overseeing Team (WOT), which was to carry out the unloading in complete secrecy. The onerous task included weight reduction by means of removing stores, portable and removable fittings, propellers, and camouflage and extensive lashings. Thick seven inch wire ropes were handled manually yet meticulously by the boys at WOT who unloaded the eight boats with clockwork precision within 24 hours of their arrival.

Then arose the challenge of towing these boats to Mumbai. While a number of boats had been towed until then using conventional towing hawser-anchor-cable combination, these methods were deemed unsuitable for towing the thin skinned missile boats. Since the towing bollards on these boats were welded to thin decks, the IN was faced with a novel technical challenge. Two training ships, INS Krishna and Tir were tasked for the towing duties. Commander (later Vice Admiral) GM Hiranandani, then Commanding Officer (CO) Tir, persuaded Headquarters Western Naval Command, to sanction two nylon hawsers (each worth over Rs one lakh) for towing the boats to Mumbai. The crews involved in towing the boats to Mumbai were positive that this technique could be used offensively to take the boats close to the enemy's citadel. Towards this extensive experiments and exercises were conducted, in the following months, to ascertain the maximum speed at which the boats could be towed. The rest, as the cliché goes, is history.

Planning and the Hiccups

Karachi was a heavily guarded port, with a large number of PN ships patrolling outside the harbour. Also, the airfields nearby at Drigh Road and Malir could provide air cover; in addition, there were 16 inch ex- battleship gun batteries at Manora and Sandspit. That despite being supposedly well protected, the missile boat attacks resulted in great losses for the PN, speaks volumes about the effective use of two of the several principles of war, surprise and offensive action.

There are many actors and factors that deserve credit for this. The missile attacks on the ships and the subsequent burning of the oil fields at Karachi Harbour for almost a week was described as *the biggest bonfire in the Arabian Sea,* by the then Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral SM Nanda. Nanda had grown up in Karachi and knew the port city well. This knowledge, in conjunction with meticulous planning at various echelons, months of exercises and trials to hone skills, as well as spirited execution by the Missile Boat Squadron went a long way in ensuring success of the operation. It is also necessary to acknowledge the strong political backing which this audacious plan received.



Missile Boat firing a missile

Many aspects of the attacks were novel – the use of missiles in this region for the first time, the resort to towing by bigger ships to overcome the problem of endurance, radio silence and ingenious methods of communication to remain undetected and using vessels meant for coastal defence in an offensive role off an enemy's coast. They were characterised by chutzpah and out of box thinking. The bold young men who braved the high seas in a tiny missile boat and operated close to the enemy's waters, sans fear deserve kudos. They could have faced enemy air attacks, surface forces or submarines. Some would have described the mission as suicidal. However, they displayed grit and guts and reaped rich rewards. This recollection by then Lieutenant Commander (later Commodore) Vijay Jerath, the CO of INS Vinash, sums it up – *"As I opened the door, the ships stern was swinging from Northwest towards Northeast and I was looking aft. The sight shocked me and for a moment I remained frozen on the ladder. The whole horizon from the North to the East was ablaze, with flames shooting 40 to 60 degrees skywards".*

As would be obvious in such operations, there were hiccups too. No

matter how meticulously a plan is crafted or rehearsed, there always remains an element of uncertainty. There were equipment breakdowns on quite a few occasions; one of the ships had to slow down on her way back after attacking the enemy's citadel, for urgent repairs while accepting the risk of retaliatory attacks. Another ship mistook a friendly to be a foe and almost readied for a missile launch! A few other command and control complications also arose. After all, the fog and friction of war is ever-present in combat and the epicentre of action is always highly dynamic and hardly ever devoid of confusion. Yet, it needs to be underscored that the operations were considered to be an overall success for their far reaching consequences and the very significant losses--both tangible as well as intangible--inflicted on the enemy.

People and Personalities

As the leader of the combined task force Commander (later Commodore) KP Gopal Rao, on board INS Kiltan, helped provide surveillance cover, anti-submarine protection, target acquisition and other forms of mutual support. Commander (later Commodore) Babru Bhan Yadav, embarked in INS Nipat, was the Commander of the Trident attack group and led his team with verve, audacity and personal example. Both of them were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. Several officers and sailors also received Vir Chakras including Lieutenant Commander BN Kavina, CO INS Nipat, Lieutenant Commander IJ Sharma, CO INS Nirghat, Lieutenant Commander OP Mehta, CO INS Veer and Lieutenant Commander Vijay Jerath, CO INS Vinash . Due to these attacks, the Missile Boat Squadron earned the nickname, **"Killers"**, a sobriquet of honour and daring that missile corvettes of subsequent generations and the men who sail in them, carry with pride.

The celebration of the Killers' feat would be incomplete if it does not include the role of the senior leaders involved in the naval planning and acquisition, especially Admiral AK Chatterji and his staff at Naval Headquarters who were instrumental in acquiring these small missile boats from the Soviet Union. Admiral Nanda, the Navy Chief during the war combined conviction, offensive spirit and risk taking ability and pushed for the unexpected and the implausible 'bombing of Karachi'. It was his strategy of destroying the war fighting capability of the enemy that played an important role in determining the outcome of the war. Mention must also be made of Captain (later Vice Admiral) KK Nayyar who implanted in the minds of the young COs, while still training in Russia, the possibility of attacking Karachi. The Technical Positions (TP) and technical personnel who maintained and prepared the missiles as well as the missiles' homing radars also need to be saluted.

End Note

Operations Trident and Python were novel and daring operations which utilised missile boats to strike close at the enemy's harbour – into his very citadel. The exploits of the IN and the 25th Missile Boat Squadron, the "Killer" Squadron, during the 1971 Indo-Pak War are ingrained in the collective memory of India and Pakistan. Be it the foresight in acquiring the missile boats from the Soviet Union or the courage of the daring men behind the machine, every element was vital for achieving this unimaginable task.

The damage inflicted and the fear created by the missile boats was far reaching – they not only debilitated the enemy's war fighting capability but also sapped their spirit and adversely impacted their morale. With these attacks the IN had earned its spurs and come of age.

At the time of writing, it is with regret that we note the passing of Commodore Gopal Rao, MVC, VSM, on 09 August 2021. As mentioned earlier, he was the leader of the task force as CO, INS Kiltan. A few weeks earlier, the Executive Officer of INS Vinash, Lieutenant Achyut M Gokhale, who was 'Mentioned in Dispatches' also sadly sailed into the blue yonder. He was a Short Service Commission officer who went on to join the IAS in 1973 and is fondly remembered as a visionary who transformed village administration especially in Nagaland.

Readers might agree that India's Navy -- an increasingly Indian-built and equipped Navy rightly celebrates the 4th of December as a day to remember and to celebrate.



Commodore Srikant Kesnur, *VSM, was commissioned on 01 Jul 1986. A Communications and Electronic Warfare Specialist, he has commanded IN Ships Jalashwa and Vindhyagiri apart from many key operational, training, diplomatic and staff assignments. A PhD from Mumbai University, he has been the Lead Author/Chief Editor of nine books/publications of the Indian Navy. He is currently the Director Maritime Warfare Centre, Mumbai as also Officer in Charge, Naval History Project.*



Lieutenant Commander Divyajot *was commissioned on 04 July 2011 as an Education Officer. She has contributed to research and editorial activities for Blue Waters Ahoy! while serving at the Naval History Division, 'Learning Lounge' while serving at NIETT and the Ahoy magazine at INA as a trainee. She is currently associated with the ongoing Naval History Project.*

Views expressed here are personal. This article is an expanded version of an article written for 'The Tribune' newspaper with additions from other previous articles on the subject written by the authors.



INS Khukri

GOING DOWN WITH INS KHUKRI:

Captain MN Mulla in 1971

This evocative piece is a letter written by Commander FA Rodrigues, IN (Retd) in response to an article Ms Ameeta Mulla Wattal had earlier penned about the loss of INS Khukri, with much of her crew and of her father, the intrepid Captain Mahendra Nath Mulla, MVC (Posthumous) who chose to go down with his ship. The decision has been debated of course in the Indian Navy as have similar acts in several other navies. This letter examines the contexts of Anti-submarine warfare (ASW), of combat and the unwritten compact between a captain and his men that he will not abandon them. Is this the price of command? Is such a sacrifice uncalled for? As the author says, it is a moral decision and a leader's life ought to be guided by his moral compass even unto the quiet acceptance of death as a choice.

Khukri and her sister ship, INS Kirpan were turned around and sailed from Mumbai on 08 December to hunt a Pakistan Navy (PN) submarine estimated to be off the coast of Gujarat. On the next night, PNS Hangor, the enemy submarine fired a homing torpedo at INS Kirpan but missed. A few minutes later she fired a second shot at the other ship, INS Khukri and hit her and two more also successfully. INS Khukri sank in a few minutes with the loss of 18 officers and 176 sailors. Only six officers and 61 sailors were rescued the next morning when INS Kirpan returned to the scene with INS Katchall.

23rd December 2010

Dear Ms Ameeta Mulla Wattal,

I am an ex- Indian naval officer who left the service honourably in 1994. I live in New Zealand, and work in Australia and New Zealand these days.

This email refers to an article you wrote some five years ago very poignantly, on your father the Late Captain Mulla, pondering why he chose to go down with his ship. The article obviously struck a chord with many of your readers, and in the way of the internet, travelled the world before it entered my mailbox a few days ago, via a social network maintained by the 42nd NDA and 51st IMA course.

I did not know your father personally, but I feel I have always known him and for what he stood for, all of my adult life. I missed the fighting in 1971 as I was cadet in the NDA at the time, and only passed out and joined a warship at sea in June 1972, six months after the war



Pakistani Submarine PNS Hangor. (Inset) Captain (IN) MN Mulla, MVC.

ended. In the event, I became an Anti-Submarine specialist and along the way, I ended up commanding three warships including INS Himgiri (also an anti- submarine frigate, although a more modernised version of the original Khukri). I retired after 20 years, joined industry, and eventually moved across the Pacific and the Tasman Sea to New Zealand.

I only say this because it has some context to the comments I make below, on the decision by your father to go down with his ship. In doing so I hope to capture the circumstances (and perhaps the greater purpose) of why captains of warships in extreme circumstances, take such drastic actions that seem to lack purpose or reason (particularly to the public at large). I am sure many naval officers of senior rank and certainly more qualified than me, may well have commented at length after reading your article. I just felt I might throw some light on a take that has largely been neglected. I know the pain never goes away and I apologise for any anguish I might give you in the process, but I do believe that Captain Mulla did something for the service that night, that has not been either understood or recognised, by both the navy, and the public at large.

The Indian Navy of 1971 was a different beast from the one we have today. Little was known about Anti-submarine warfare (ASW) at the time. We commissioned our first submarine in 1968 in the then Soviet Union and had barely begun operating a fledgling submarine arm by 1970. Pakistan by contrast, had been operating submarines since the early sixties. Ships like the Khukri and Kirpan supposedly specialised in ASW, formed the vanguard against the fight against Pakistani submarines. They had little in the way of operational experience against submarines, and even less knowledge about the ocean environment.

The physics of detection can be explained in simple non-technical terms. The Khukri had sonar called the 'Sonar 170' which was the best we had at the time. It had a maximum range (in laboratory conditions) of only 1500 yards. We knew little about the harsh nature of the environment underwater.

The seas in the tropical waters off India's coastline are heated up in the morning and afternoons, raising surface temperatures to ambient levels. The worst effect is in the afternoons. The laws of physics then apply. They literally bend the sonar waves downwards, severely limiting detection range. Since deeper waters are ice cold, there is meeting point of the warm waters on the top and the cold waters below. This meeting point is called the 'layer' where the sonar beam bounces off and is almost totally reflected upwards. There is very little penetration below the layer. These layers lie between 30 and 60 metres depth in tropical waters and are exploited by expert submariners who are able to hide under it.

It took us another 15 years after the war, in all of which I was professionally involved with in one way or another, to fully understand the nature of anti-submarine warfare, and to learn how to work with the physical limitations imposed by a hostile ocean underwater environment. Submarines, on the other hand, are not as handicapped, as they do not need to transmit on their sonars to detect a ship. Their engines are silent. They can consequently listen out for a warship and even identify a type of ship and its signature from the sound of its engines. Skilled submariners hide beneath the layer and approach with stealth. They only transmit at the last possible moment when they need a final range to fire their torpedoes.

Warships at sea in 1971 (and Captain Mulla in particular) would have been more than aware of these limitations. They would have known two simple facts:

a) That a submarine at sea would have already detected a surface ship long before the ship had even reached any kind of detection range;
b) That even if the warship did detect the submarine, it would be at the penultimate moment, when the submarine had already fired, (or was on the verge of firing) its torpedoes, giving the warship a few minutes at best, to take avoiding action, let alone counterattack.

The Pakistani submarine that sank the Khukri used its environment to maximum advantage. In hindsight and over the years, we developed better sonars and better tactics. We employed dedicated ASW aircraft with sonobuoys and magnetic detectors, helicopters with dunking sonars, and yes, we spent a lot of time learning the harsh facts of the ocean environment we were forced to operate in.

This is the context in which ships put to sea in 1971, against an adversary who was well versed in using submarines to maximum advantage. Our own ASW ships had little in the way of riposte or as much experience we would have liked to have had before the war, of fighting submarines. In the event, every sailor at sea recognises a moment of truth, when all of his training and skills are put to the ultimate test. It is the moment when the ship beats to quarters and goes into action against an enemy in sight, or an enemy that has been detected.

Khukri and Kirpan were operating in submarine infested waters. The ship would have gone to 'action stations' against a submarine many times over in the days and nights preceding the sinking of the Khukri, sometimes for genuine reasons, sometimes over false alarms. All of this would have exhausted the crew and formed the 'fog of war' that hindsight experts, armchair generals/admirals and the public never quite get.

Each time the crew of the Khukri beat to quarters and battened down for action, a clarion call would have been broadcast on its Main Broadcast, *"Hands to Action Stations, Assume First Degree Anti-Submarine Readiness, Assume Damage Control State One Condition Zulu"*. The crew of the Khukri would have known fully well that they were going against a committed enemy, and that the dice were loaded against them. Each of them would have been wondering whether they were going to come out of the action alive or dead. This is an age old fear that men have, and then learn to conquer, when they go to sea and to war. It is the nature of the beast. The army and the air force face similar issues, which they deal with in their own inimitable way.

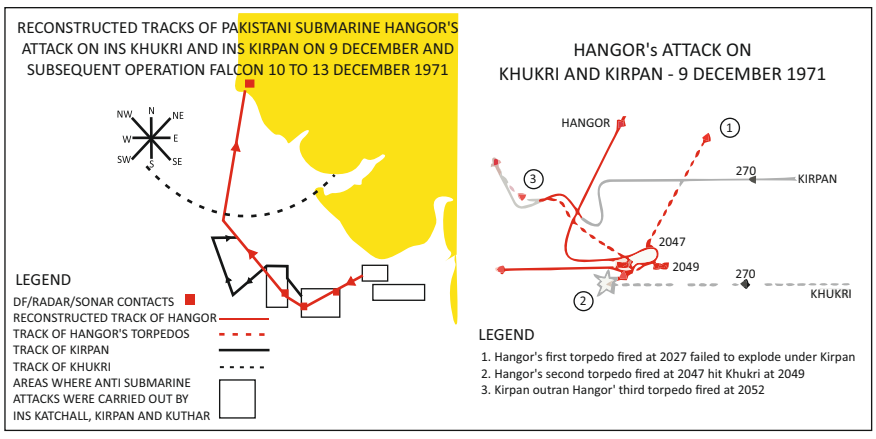
The people most at risk on board the Khukri that night would have been its technical departments: engineering and electrical officers and sailors, closed up at action stations in the bowels of the ship three and four decks below the waterline, keeping the engines and the machinery running, so that their captain could fight. Each of them knew that if a torpedo were to hit, it would do so either below the keel or where they were located, and that the chances of them surviving would be a lot less than for those sailors who were fortunate to be located on the upper decks, and above the waterline.

> It forced all of us who came after him, and who were privileged to command men in peace and war, to recognise that undeniable and unspoken bond between fighting men ...

It takes a special kind of motivation to get these men to go down into the bowels of a fighting ship whilst in action against a submarine. They do so each time out of a sense of duty that the ship cannot fight without them and mostly because they recognise that one single unspoken truth… *that their captain will not forsake them; that their captain will not leave them behind. That is the crux of the why, and the reason why captains at sea honour this unspoken agreement.*

Captain Mulla would have known that many of his boys were trapped (but yet alive) in the bowels of his ship when it went down, in the few minutes after the torpedoes hit. He tried to help as many as he could, but I suspect he could not bring himself to save himself, whilst his boys were dying down below. That he chose to go down is a personal decision, perhaps even a moral decision; but it was a decision that set a standard that will save lives in future actions. It forced all of us who came after him, and who were privileged to command men in peace and war, to recognise that undeniable and unspoken bond between fighting men … that you fight your ship against an enemy (or the ocean in a storm), with what you have, and to the best of your ability, and that come what may, you never forsake your troops or leave a man under your command, behind you.

What Captain Mulla did that fateful day has had an enormous and positive impact on the service he loved and on the men who continue to serve it to this day. It reminds every one of us chosen to command, of the qualities of leadership needed under duress, and of the ultimate responsibility we have to the families of the men we command; *"You never forsake your men – You never leave a man behind"*.





INS Khukri Memorial at Diu.

I know that this hardly helps when trying to explain all of this to the family of a captain who makes the ultimate sacrifice. Nor does it assuage the grief of a young girl trying to understand why her father chose to voluntarily die, rather than save himself. For a fledgling service in independent India, trying to forge its own traditions independent of the Royal Indian Navy of yore, the impact was enormous. It was one of the many actions in the 1971 war that made us equal partners with the Army and Air Force in the defence of independent India.

I am reminded of the last few stanzas of Ronald Hopwood's classic poem 'Our Fathers' that I quote below.

"When we've raced the seagulls, run submerged across the Bay,
When we've tapped a conversation fifteen hundred miles away,
When the gyros spin superbly, when we've done away with coals,
And the tanks are full of fuel, and the targets full of holes,

When the margin's full of safety, when the weakest in the fleet
Is a Hyper-Super-Dreadnought, when the squadrons are complete,
Let us pause awhile and ponder, in the light of days gone by,
With their strange old ships and weapons, what our Fathers did, and why.

Then if still we dare to argue that we're just as good as they,
We can seek the God of Battles on our knees, and humbly pray
That the work we leave behind us, when our earthly race is run,
May be half as well completed as our Fathers' work was done".

My wife Sharon and I wish you and your family a great Christmas and a happy and prosperous New Year 2011. If you or your family do visit New Zealand do look us up.

Allan Rodrigues
New Zealand

(This article was first carried, with the approval of the author in its original form by "Mashaal", the Journal of the IN's Centre for Leadership and Behavioural Studies in 2011).



Commander Allan Rodrigues
(cleared Captain) retired from the Indian Navy in 1994. He has been the 'Sword of Honour' of his course and a 'Lentaigne' medal winner at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. He spent most of his career as an ASW specialist. He also commanded IN Ships Nipat, Himgiri and Subhadra. He left the Navy to join industry, eventually moving overseas to New Zealand. He has been a Vice President with the Hinduja Group, a senior consultant with KPMG (NZ), Regional Director (Asia) of TVNZ and the Head of the largest MBA programme in New Zealand. He is currently the Managing Director of a management consulting firm and also sits on the board of a number of companies in New Zealand. He has an MSc (Def Studies) and an MBA (Finance) from Henley University, Oxford on Thames UK.



Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Army Chief, General SHFJ Maneskshaw - A relationship of trust.

THE DUO AT THE HELM

- Mrs G and Sam

The author has put together some interesting incidents from the lives of the two main leaders of the 1971 War.

".....her manner in discussion alternates between feminine charm and impressively masculine decisiveness....." reported Guy Mountford, Chairman Project Tiger Mission (WWF International), after his successful one on one meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

"By Jove, you have a sense of humour. I think you are worth saving" uproariously remarked the Australian surgeon on the battlefield in Burma (World War II) when the severely wounded Major Manekshaw with nine bullets lodged in his body was asked *"what happened"* to which he responded nonchalantly *"Oh, I was kicked by a mule."*

Vijay Diwas of the India Pakistan 1971 War is as much about "Vijay" across the battlefields in the West, the East, across the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and air dominance over the subcontinent per se, as was the composite persona of India's Prime Minister and the Armed Forces Chiefs' who together strode across the stage in December 71, like giants.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's over arching vision of National Interest and National Security imperatives on the one hand and on the other, her tenacious self confidence and imperious decisiveness for the liberation of Bangla Desh came to fore during the Cabinet Meetings of April 1971 which "kick-started" so to say, the December 1971 War.

At Ease With The Armed Forces

I have nothing concrete to back my assertion that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was of the firm belief in the inherent, institutional loyalty of the Indian Armed Forces and she felt utterly at ease in their company; even to the extent of "let her hair down",

should the occasion so demand and have no regrets in doing so!

My most unforgettable episode of PM Indira Gandhi's sense of complete ease in the company of the Armed Forces is from her journey to Port Blair on board the Navy's Flag Ship INS Mysore, in 1968. Her principal advisors had sounded her about the presence of an international commerce cabal operating from and plundering wholesale the Coral wealth of our Andaman & Nicobar archipelago. So she decided on the sea voyage to assess on site the dimension of the nefarious enterprise and provide directions to snuff out the brigandage.

There was no air connectivity but INS Mysore being on routine training in the Bay of Bengal, was ordered to hasten and drop anchor at Chennai. No sooner had they done so that they learnt of PM Indira Gandhi's programme to embark the next morning, on a forty eight hour voyage to Port Blair.

As is the wont of the Indian Armed Forces, all sailors focussed their energies on the ship-shapeliness of their vessel while the Captain applied his mind to a tentative programme of the PM on board. For the most, the PM would be left to be on her own except for a brief visit to the "Bridge", tea with the senior sailors and a quiet dinner with the Admiral. And Lieutenant Premvir Das would be her Aide-de-Camp during the voyage.

Now post retirement, Vice Admiral Premvir Das recounted that *".... she moved about quite easily, climbing the several ladders to the "Bridge" with agility..... Around 9 pm after dinner she sent word that she would like to visit the Wardroom to meet the officers.....it was 10 pm when she asked if anyone could sing.....in a flash the Wardroom resounded....sailor songs like 'Blueberry Hill'.....by now everyone had become quite relaxed and one of us proposed that she might give us a song. The PM didn't bat an eyelid. With a faint smile approaching a blush she said that she knew very few but would sing if we all joined in. "Yes PM" we shouted in chorus and she began "Oh dear Susannah";*

Oh, I come from Alabama
with a banjo on my knee!
Going to Louisiana,
my true love for to see
Oh Susanna!
Oh don't you cry for me!
For I come from Alabama
with a banjo on my knee
It rained all night the day I left,
the weather it was dry
The sun so hot I froze to death,
Susanna don't you cry
Oh Susanna!
Oh don't you cry for me!
For I come from Alabama
with a banjo on my knee!
(Today, listed among the world's Top Hundred Western folk songs).

The youngest officer, Sub-Lieutenant Robin Gupta who had been denied permission to marry a foreigner and knowing that the PM's son was set to marry an Italian, found the convivial atmosphere ideal to politely ask as to why he can't do likewise? The PM smiled and said *"...it helped that my son was not in the Navy!"* Two months later, Lieutenant Premvir Das *"found in my mail an envelope in handmade paper with the inscription "Prime Minister's House"*. It contained an invitation for Lieutenant and Mrs Das to attend the wedding reception of Rajiv & Sonia". [1]

Another episode of how much PM Indira Gandhi felt at complete ease in the discreet company of the Armed Forces was narrated to me by Lieutenant General Mathew Thomas, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, when I served on his staff at HQ 10 Corps. General Thomas happened to be the Commandant of the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun when its Golden Jubilee celebrations were being planned. Not taking chances with the weather for air travel, the PM's arrival was scheduled for the previous evening and she had expressed preference to stay on the Academy premises and have a "quiet" evening.

General Thomas felt that he ought to at least make an attempt to invite the PM to a "quiet" dinner at their residence. Mrs Gandhi accepted the invitation but on condition that there was no fanfare and no other guests. No sooner she stepped inside the privacy of their house, Mrs Gandhi made General & Mrs Thomas feel as though they were her long lost, dear friends and happily sipped whiskey and graciously broke bread with the couple!

And yet the very same PM Indira Gandhi would be at her indifferent worst, almost haughty during a formal meeting with President Richard Nixon and his formidable Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the White House

And yet the very same PM Indira Gandhi would be at her indifferent worst, almost haughty during a formal meeting with President Richard Nixon and his formidable Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the White House, just days before the 1971 War because that was the need of the hour in India's National Interest!

Sam Bahadur

Well, what of her Army Chief, the always "Sam" in one to one engagements? We do not know at what stage in his Army career in a chance face-to-face with a Gorkha Jawan he enquired good-naturedly "what is your name"? The Jawan smiled and said *"Harka Bahadur Gurung, Shaab"*. Known for his gift of spontaneity in striking conversation with Jawans he asked "And what is my name"? The Gorkha lifted his head skywards, thought for a while and replied confidently **"Sam Bahadur"!** And from that moment of tete-a-tete exchange, with the high and low, stepping up the command ladder till the pinnacle, Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan, MC would be fondly known to the world, in his lifetime and after simply as, "Sam Bahadur"!

[1] Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's biography "Indira Gandhi, A Life in Nature" by Jairam Ramesh, 2017, foot note on Page 77

It would be no exaggeration to state that through the better part of October and November 1971, the Chief made a deliberate effort to meet with as many soldiers as possible, to strike a personal rapport as it were, among those in the trenches and above all to motivate them to the battle winning determination. And his spontaneity and unique manner of "chatting up" emerge best from somewhere in the Eastern Command, when on asking where he came from, a Sikh Jawan answered *"Umbersar, Sahabji"*. In a flash, General Manekshaw put his hand out and said *"Haath mila, meanh be Umbersaria haan"* (shake hand, I too am Amritsar born)! So who wouldn't follow such a Chief to the ends of the Earth!!

Sometime in the mid sixties, an enlightened soul had conceived the idea of setting up a Coffee Parlour in the corridors of power in South Block. The room chosen used to be a kind of a visitor's lounge opposite the office of the Director of Military Intelligence which could seat about twenty and it soon became a popular joint for a snappy break, away from files. Passing by one day, on hearing muffled sounds of laughter, Sam Manekshaw stepped in. Sam wasn't given to dampen cheery spirits and he too ordered a coffee. One thing led to another till the Chief mentioned that among the Cabinet Ministers, the one he developed high regard for was Babu Jagjivan Ram.

The Chief was summoned by the Minister one day who politely handed him a slip of paper with the name of an officer whom he wished to be cleared for promotion. The Chief replied good naturedly that as a matter of principle, he never interfered with the results of the Promotion Boards unless the request came from his girl friend. No one could have accused Babu Jagjivan Ram of witticisms but on this occasion he said *"Saam, yeh bhi kuch aisa he mamlaa haey!!* And the ensuing laughter from the Coffee Parlour could be heard even in the North Block!

And as for his professional acumen, that Sam was in a class apart was evidenced following a Press Conference at New Delhi, a day after the cease fire when a European correspondent pointedly asked that much as the world was impressed by the Indian Army's multi-pronged thrusts leading to the encirclement of Dhaka and a magnificent victory, the upper-most question on every one's lips is whether the Chief had a conceptual strategy in place? General Manekshaw's instant response was, *"Yes of course, the Strategy of the Expanding Torrent"*. For sure, there were more expressions of bewilderment among the gathered correspondents than comprehension and so Sam Bahadur made a brief exposition of what he had brilliantly pulled out of his hat, extempore!

His reply went something like this: *"as a stream commences its course and its flow is checked by a boulder, there is well-nigh no momentum at that stage to dislodge the obstruction. So it maintains contact with the obstruction while the follow up water rushes past the sides of the boulder. By the next hindrance, the gathering velocity ensures that the stream cuts into the sides of the obstruction, engulfs it and flows past enlarging both its course and velocity and on and on, becoming an unstoppable torrent!"*

I am convinced that Sam Bahadur's on-the-spot conceptualization of a new strategy was the measure of a military genius! However, I would be less than honest not to place on record, an utterly despondent moment when for reasons the Chief has carried to Valhalla, he chose to rebuke a gathering of about two hundred all ranks (mostly Jawans) in the week after the cease fire in the vicinity of village Palanwala, on the Chhamb battlefield. Each one of us had expected the Chief to say "Shabaash" loud and clear, for standing their ground under the most adverse odds but instead, he chose to emphatically shame us all (the battle scarred, each one) for what was possibly the miscalculations of the higher command echelons.

With a stern expression on his otherwise smiling face, Sam Bahadur lashed out, *"...jao, upnaey hathiyar saaf karo, Dooshman kay saath laraie key lieya phir say tieyaar ho jao, Chhamb ko upnaay kabzay me phir say lao....."* words to that effect have since remained firmly etched to this day, in my memory bank.

In utter contrast, here was the Sam Bahadur also noted for his sense of mischievous humour. I had read an anecdote relating to the annual "At Home" at the residence of the Chief on the occasion of Army Day, January 1972. The President of India as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces headed the list of invitees followed by the Prime Minister of India. When Mrs Indira Gandhi arrived, General Manekshaw walked up to receive her. No one can deny that Mrs Indira Gandhi was among the most elegantly dressed, petite and charming ladies of her times. General Manekshaw would rate equally as one of the trim and handsome Chiefs in uniform.
Now on this occasion, his right foot was heavily bandaged and leaning on a walking stick, he limped up to receive Mrs Gandhi. The sight of him at once evoked Mrs Gandhi's empathy and she enquired with genuine concern: *"Oh! What happened Sam?"* At his mischievous best and with a twinkle in his eyes Sam Bahadur replied: *"To tell you the truth Madame Prime Minister, this is just a ruse to garner affections of beautiful ladies!"* Mrs Gandhi blushed and could not repress a chuckle. That too is the Man in Sam Manekshaw as was recounted in one of the issues of The Sainik Samachar.



Lt Gen Baljit Singh, *AVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1956. He superannuated from service in 1992 after a distinguished career spanning 36 years. He was invited to the Board of Trustees of World Wildlife India in 1990 and served two terms therein.*



Brigadier Anand Sarup receiving the Mahavir Chakra from The President.

LESSONS TO LEARN FROM 1971

The trigger to Bangladesh's uprising in March 1971 and genocide by the Pakistan Army thereafter was the willful denial of the democratic right of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to form the central government. These events were not sudden. Dissent over language and culture, two emotive and sensitive issues were simmering almost from the beginning of Pakistan's formation and the announcement of 'Urdu' being the only national language. Nation-building is a process that needs time, sensitivity, and accommodations. The relevance of this lesson is so much greater in a diverse and divisive society such as Pakistan. The military governments didn't help matters either.

The mass migration of Bengalis from East Pakistan into India and its human, social and economic implications gave birth to a point of view in some high government circles in India that the Army should be ordered into East Pakistan which willy nilly meant going to war with Pakistan immediately. It was the unequivocal and emphatic advice of General Sam Manekshaw, the Army Chief to give ourselves the necessary time to prepare if we wanted success. A nation doesn't go to war till it doesn't see a good chance of victory and that comes with sound preparation and not knee-jerk reactions. Mrs. Indira Gandhi accepted the military view. This was the most critical decision and paid very handsome dividends.

India stood for a righteous cause in the conflict, but the perceptions of nations are quite often built upon their national interests, alliances, and many other key considerations and therefore, biased. Mrs. Gandhi herself undertook prolonged visits to the USA and many other Western countries to put across India's just cause and win international support. As the Pakistan Army assisted by Razakars intensified their tyranny and Bangladeshis lost all hope for a peaceful solution, the insurgency by Mukti Bahini gathered strength. A few of the regular units of the Pakistan Army composed of Bangladeshis also crossed over. Many a senior officer deserted. Media also batted for the cause. The US consulate in Dhaka sent horrifying accounts to their Foreign Office through "Blood Telegrams" (Blood being the name of the Consul General). These were ignored by Kissinger and Nixon due to their proverbial biases.

India has been and continues to be, one of the biggest importers of military hardware, most of it from Russia. We needed an assurance of uninterrupted supply to make up for the deficiencies, spares, and losses. An alliance treaty signed with the Soviet Union, inter alia, provided security from Pakistani allies. Major powers avoid situations of eyeball to eyeball

contact between each other for fear of escalation. They tend to lay red lines for the conflicting nations due to the leverage they have, while continuing to support them covertly or overtly.

As we prepared for war, one sensed a steely resolve in our troops and leaders. Preparations were methodical, equipment deficiencies were made up, ammunition reserves were built up and training of troops was rigorous. Resultantly, greater confidence and combat readiness were developed. The road and rail communications in the Northeast particularly in Tripura were improved to give us the option of a major offensive from that direction as well.

The next important lesson seen in all campaigns and well known to military professionals is that execution of offensives must be bold. The Indian forces in the Eastern Theatre scored on this account and brilliant Indian commanders seized opportunities, advanced rapidly, while Indian soldiers, sailors, and airmen rose to the occasion. The result is there for all to see - a blitzkrieg through East Pakistan.

To achieve this 'Vijay', General Manekshaw and the senior military leadership optimized resources. 101 Communication Zone, a static logistics-oriented headquarters was utilised in an offensive role. Ad hoc organizations and military groups were set up, by restructuring available reserves. Hardly anyone was "left out of battle". These steps created a magical Multiplier Effect. A valuable Force Multiplier was the Mukti Bahini. They were our eyes and ears, guiding the advancing forces through alternate routes, ensuring phenomenal local support, while invoking fear and caution on Pakistani troops patrolling and venturing out of their defended areas. My salute to the Mukti Bahini - our 'brothers in arms'.

I would also like to emphasize the 'fog of war' dilemma. Situational Awareness is vital and we as commanders had to constantly move up to get the correct picture on the frontline. As they say, "one look is better than a 1000 reports". In contemporary conditions today, situational awareness has improved vastly with drones, satellites, and various surveillance sensors providing far clearer battlefield transparency. But such battlefield transparency is available to the enemy too, and large-scale troop movements will be picked up. Smaller, more agile forces may be able to achieve better surprise.

Situational Awareness is vital and we as commanders had to constantly move up to get the correct picture on the frontline. As they say, "one look is better than a 1000 reports".

History repeatedly emphasises that the security of the country or its vital interests are better served with neighbours who are not inimical to your interests. The British fought three Afghan wars with heavy losses to protect their profitable Indian empire by denying Russians any influence in Afghanistan. This was referred to as 'The Great Game'. They let Thailand be a buffer state between their empire and the French-held territories in East Asia. President Kennedy blockaded Cuba when Khrushchev established missile bases on the island. The US battled every effort to prevent the ingress of communist influence in South America. China is wooing India's neighbours to again deny India this strategic advantage.

Lastly, my "Over the Horizon" view is that Indian warriors are undoubtedly valiant, hardy, face adversity better, take on great challenges and operate effectively under conditions of immense stress. These worthy men may have to face a technologically superior enemy in the future. Tanks deployed on the Kailash Range in Eastern Ladakh would be sitting ducks to kamikaze drones; bunkers, and posts on mountain tops may be pulverised by drone swarms. Hence, the Indian forces must achieve technological superiority or parity. Technological inferiority would be hurtful to our sovereignty and freedom. The national and military leadership must remain alive to this reality in the fast-changing technological leaps of the future. As future wars are likely to be swift and short, the existing assets at the beginning will be the only ones available. Technology will demand a higher standard of education and on both counts a sustainable high level of training and multitasking in some areas. We must not lower our guard or be complacent in matters of national security. Jai Hind!



Lieutenant General ANAND SARUP, *PVSM, MVC, was commissioned into 8th Gorkha Rifles in December 1949. As a young officer, he attended three courses back to back in US Army Schools ie Rangers, Special Forces (Honour Graduate) and Jungle Warfare in 1961. In 1965-66, Anand Sarup graduated from the Command and Staff College in USA. He commanded both the battalions he served in during the early years of his career, one in Sikkim and the other in Sela. He was awarded the MAHAVIR CHAKRA for his command of KILO Force in the 1971 War. He went on to command an Infantry Brigade, a Division and a Strike Corps. He has also served on the Faculty of DSSC and is an Alumnus of National Defence College. After a short stint as DG Infantry, he assumed the appointment of Master General Ordnance and finally took charge as Deputy Chief of Army Staff. Lieutenant General Anand Sarup retired to Dehradun in 1987 after 38 professionally fruitful and happy years.*

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