

IN QUEST OF **FREEDOM** THE WAR OF 1971

**PERSONAL ACCOUNTS BY SOLDIERS
FROM INDIA AND BANGLADESH**

**EDITED BY
MAJ GEN IAN CARDOZO**



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*Dedicated to the Officers and Men of the Indian Armed Forces, and
the Mukti Bahini, who fought for the liberation of Bangladesh*

CONTENTS

Preface

Acknowledgements

Part 1: CARNAGE IN BANGLADESH, AND THE QUEST OF FREEDOM

1. Ampati: A Graveyard and the Benevolent Woman

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

2. Asgar Baluch: A Soldier and Survivor

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

3. A Tamil Family Brutalized

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

4. Battle of Mahalchori and Shaheed Captain Aftab Qader, Bir Uttam

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

5. Murder and Mayhem at Gandhi Ashram

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

6. Chawk Haldi: The Village of Widows
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
7. The Massacre of an Imam and His Family
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
8. First Casualty of Niazi's Cruelty
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
9. Gruesome Murders at the Sayedpur Railway Workshop 36
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
10. Killing the Best Bengali Pilots of PIA
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
11. Omar Faruq and the Flag of Bangladesh
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
12. Requiem for the Falcon
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
13. The Forgotten Resting Place and the Two Brothers
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
14. The Victims of Halderpur Village
Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik
15. Bir Bikram U.K. Ching and His Rescue Operation at Kauahat Village

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee, Bir Protik

Part 2: THE WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT

1. Stories of 18 Rajput
Brigadier Balraj Kapur
2. Liberation of Bangladesh
Colonel Kuldev Nand
3. The Battle of Hilli
Brigadier Prakash Tularam Ghogale, VSM
4. Ambush at Mile Stone 10, December 1971
Colonel A. Krishnaswami, VrC, VSM
5. Battle of Bhaduria
Captain R.Y.S. Chauhan
6. Battle of Mynamati
Colonel Shyam Singh
7. 52 Engineer Regiment in a Non-Conventional Role
Brigadier J.S. Makkar, VSM
8. Triumphant March: Agartala to Dhaka 1971
Colonel K.S. Mann
9. Battles of Pirganj and Bogra
Colonel Itbar Singh
10. Infiltrating Behind the Enemy: The Battle of Hilli
Brigadier V.R. Swaminathan
11. Brigadier Tom Pande, Maha Vir Chakra (MVC)
General Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM

Part 3: THE WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT

1. Battle of Gadra City
Lieutenant Colonel Sunhara Singh, VrC
2. Battle of Sangam
Lieutenant Colonel R.K. Saini, SM
3. Attack on the Dussi Bund-Burj
Brigadier Ranbir Singh
4. Flight Lieutenant Wajid Ali Khan
Colonel (Dr) S.V. Kotwal ex RMO, 11 Guards
5. Skirmish at Chicken's Neck
Colonel (Dr) S.V. Kotwal, ex-RMO, 11 Guards
6. Op Ghurki
Major Harish Rautela, SM
7. A Staff Officer's Story: 1971 Operations in the Western Sector
Colonel Gurdeep Singh Gill
8. Battle of Burj
Major General H.C. Sachdev, SM
9. Capture of Ring Contour
Colonel Surendra Singh Tomar

Part 4: THE AIR WAR

1. Memoirs of 6 December 1971
Air Commodore Ashok P. Shinde, VrC, VM
2. Night Bombing of Dhaka
Air Commodore Manbir Singh, VrC, VM
3. Wish I had a Gun
Air Commodore Manbir Singh, VrC, VM
4. FTW Vampires No. 121 Squadron in 1971 War: The Untold Story
Wing Commander W.H. Marshall

5. Photo Mission over Tangail
Group Captain N.G. Junnarkar, VrC
6. Canberra Missions on Both Fronts
Wing Commander A. Raghunath, VrC
7. December Diary: Flying with the Battle Axes
Wing Commander Kulbir Singh Harnal
8. With Canberras on the Western Front
Wing Commander K.S. Chandrashekhar, VM

Part 5: MARITIME OPERATIONS

1. INS Vikrant in the 1971 War
Rear Admiral S. Ramsagar, AVSM, VrC, NM
2. The Riddle of PNS Ghazi
Commodore K.P. Mathew, AVSM
3. Clearing the PNS Ghazi Minefield
Commodore K.P. Mathew, AVSM
4. The Missile Boat Operations
Commodore Vijay Jerath, VrC

Conclusion

Glossary of Military Terms

About the Contributors

PREFACE

In Quest of Freedom is a testament to the spirit of collaboration and aid between the Indian Armed Forces and the people of Bangladesh, who rose and triumphed against one of the most vicious campaigns against humanity in the twentieth century, a Pakistani jihad that resulted in its own defeat, the loss of ninety-three thousand prisoners of war and the liberation of a new country – Bangladesh.

Whereas military historians have written about the war and what happened during those calamitous days in historical terms, it is the human aspect that is often lost in the recording of history. It is therefore the intention of this book to portray how individuals, both military and civil, saw the war and reacted to the callous challenges of a barbaric intervention and carried out their duties as best as they could. Their stories bring to light little known facts about what really occurred during this brutal war.

So, while the military histories of the Indo-Pak War of 1971 cover the strategy, the challenges, and complexities of the campaigns and the brilliance or the blunders in the conduct of the battles; this book covers the experiences of the men who took part in them. Events that would be dismissed in official histories in a few lines are recounted here in greater detail.

The first part of this volume covers the carnage and savagery inflicted by the Pakistan Army on the helpless men, women, and children of Bangladesh. The misconduct of the Pakistani Army generals that allowed its officers and men to rape, pillage, and kill is perhaps one of the principal reasons for the Pakistan Army's abject defeat. Personnel of the Pakistan Army could no longer consider themselves to be soldiers. They had in fact

become bandits and could not thereafter fight as a disciplined force. The extent of their depravity has never been exposed because it is too horrible to even comprehend. The misconduct of Pakistani officers and soldiers has been condemned in *The Hamdoorman Report*, Pakistan's official document on the conduct of the Pakistan Army and the bearing of its officers and soldiers.

The second half deals with the war on the Eastern Front, which in fact was the focal point of this war. Whereas the capture of Dacca was not part of the original plan, so swift was the success of the Indian offensives that Dacca automatically fell into becoming the prime objective halfway through the war.

The third part of the book covers the war on the Western Front. The strategy here was one of offensive defence that is to defend in the West, but to carry out limited offensives to improve the ground position wherever possible, and to be in a position of advantage at the end of the war. However, so swift and successful was the war in the East that the conflict on that front was wrapped up in a mere thirteen days. America, was especially concerned that India would now shift her forces from the East to the West, in an attempt to once and for all resolve problems that had begun with partition and had continued ever since. Strategically, this is exactly what should have happened. The principles of war – Concentration of Force, Offensive Action, Maintenance of Momentum, Flexibility, all demanded that we should have gone for the Pakistani jugular. But India's political strategy did not envision the destruction of Pakistan and political considerations overruled a possible military option.

During the 1971 conflict, the Indian Air Force knocked the Pakistani Air Force out of the skies over East Pakistan and established air superiority for the entire duration of the war, allowing Indian land and naval forces to carry out their tasks without hindrance. This was a major factor in the success of the Indian operations over land and sea. The personal stories of some of those who took part in the air war makes for interesting reading.

The Indian Navy, which was hamstrung during the 1965 war by a government directive that prevented the force from undertaking offensive

operations or crossing the 24th parallel, took the war into Pakistani waters during the 1971 hostilities, a day after Pakistan attacked Indian airfields. On the very first day of the war, Indian Navy missile boats sank a Pakistani destroyer, a minesweeper, and two merchant ships carrying ammunition. They then went on to set the Keamari oil fields, at Karachi on fire and it burned for seven days and nights. The Pakistani Navy bolted into Karachi harbour and refused to fight. As a result, for the first time in maritime history, a blockade of Pakistani ports on the West Coast was established without the physical presence of Indian Naval ships outside Karachi harbour! Again, on the very first day of the war, Pakistan's long-range submarine *PNS Ghazi* that was tracking *INS Vikrant*, self-destructed, outside the port of Vishakhapatnam. On the East Coast, Indian Navy frogmen worked wonders, along with their Mukti Bahini counterparts, in destroying Pakistani naval and maritime craft in the river estuaries and approaches to Chittagong harbour. Finally, when an American task force of the Seventh Fleet moved into the Bay of Bengal from the Pacific, on orders of the American President Richard Nixon, to rescue Pakistan, it was too late! The war had been wrapped up and a new nation – Bangladesh had been born.

After reading the stories of this book, one cannot help but conclude that the narrators of these stories were working towards a need larger than themselves. Their actions are indicative of their concern to put the interests of their country above their own and to respond with courage well beyond the call of duty in consonance with the code of conduct of the Indian Armed Forces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the Editor of this book and as a veteran who has taken part in three wars, I am of the opinion that there are many war stories waiting to be told and it is about time that these are shared with the citizens of our country.

I therefore feel indebted to CLAWS for their initiative in bringing out the experiences of veterans who have taken part in the Indo-Pak War of 1971. I therefore offer Director, CLAWS my grateful thanks for creating a platform to war veterans to share their experiences with the general public.

Furthermore, in the course of editing this book I have learnt much from the experiences of the armed forces of India and Bangladesh—a learning that has helped me to understand aspects of the 1971 war, which I would have not otherwise known. I therefore wish to acknowledge their contribution in bringing the war in a closer perspective to the reader.

I have enjoyed working on this book because of the interest taken by Bloomsbury India, the publishers who have gone the extra mile to make sure that the book is well received. Last, but not the least, I wish to thank Colonel Anuraag Chhibber, the Coordinator of this CLAWS publication, for his competence, consideration and patience in helping me to edit this wonderful collection of war stories.

I wish to once again remind the readers of this book that there are many more stories waiting to be told of all the wars that we have fought since Independence.

PART – 1

Carnage in Bangladesh, and the Quest of Freedom

AMPATI

A GRAVEYARD AND THE BENEVOLENT WOMAN

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

In 1971, Meghalaya was part of the state of Assam. After the crackdown by the Pakistan Army, in Bangladesh in March 1971, a large part of the population took shelter in the bordering states of India. The people from the districts of Sherpur, Mymensingh, Netrokona and Jamalpur moved across the border into India. Many of them took shelter around Tura and Mahendraganj areas of the country. As these two areas could not accommodate all of them, the refugees started moving inwards following the narrow branch of the Dumni River.

By April, the refugee trail reached Ampati village. Meghalaya's population consists mainly of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes. However, the majority of the people of the Ampati area were from the Garo tribe.

The condition of the refugees was desperate. They had to walk for more than 20 miles into India. Thousands of refugees camped near the branch of the Dumni River, near Ampati. The large gathering of refugees created tension among the Garo people, who were upset at the proximity of the refugee camps to their village. They apprehended that they would become permanent settlers and would not return to their original home. The

landowners and villagers of Garo came in large numbers and obstructed the refugees in their effort to set up the camps. A tense situation arose. The refugees were hungry, tired and did not have the energy to move any more. Many of them were lying in the open and begging the Garo leaders to allow them to camp near the river.

After a brief period of utter confusion, a woman from the village appeared on the scene. She inquired about the situation from the Garo leaders. They were very respectful to her and repeated their concern about the refugees. After hearing about the problem, she went to the refugees and saw their plight. Tears rolled down her cheeks at seeing the condition of the refugees. She addressed the Garo leaders telling them that everyone had the right to exist in this world. She said if they did not allow the refugees to camp in their land, she would provide her land to them, near the riverside. The Garo leaders cautioned her that her property could be endangered, as the refugees might not leave the land, if they are allowed to settle down there. However, she had made up her mind.

The woman sent for the elders among the refugees and told them that they could camp on her property, near the river. She requested them to remain peaceful and not to cause any tension with the Garo tribesmen. The refugees settled down near the river on her land and their numbers increased. The benevolent woman made the moral choice of identifying herself with the hungry, the sick, the homeless, and the desperate. She chose to give dignity to people, who were denied their self-worth and their right to live; she chose to respond to a higher calling of service and to her conscience, at a time when so many were silent. She dared to go against the opinion of her own people. Her determination to protect and preserve the sanctity of life in the darkest hours of humankind's life and her humane qualities to her fellow-beings is a reminder of the moral choices that we should have the courage to make in times of crisis.

The kind, wealthy woman had not only provided the refugees her land to camp on, but also provided them with food and clothing. Every morning, she would walk to the camps with her 6-year-old son clutching her hand and accompanied by her servants, who carried food for the refugees. The

refugees in turn could also visit the kind woman at her home. She would make her son sit with the refugees and have his meals with them. The peaceful refugees slowly earned the confidence of the local people, who made efforts to help them. After some time, assistance from the Indian Government and other agencies arrived. The refugees called the woman 'Ma Jee' since they did not know her name.

Gradually, the other areas around the first camp began to be filled up with more refugees and the total number of people in the camps grew to approximately 45,000. It became one of the largest refugee camps.

In June, during the monsoon season an epidemic broke out in the refugee camps. The woman was seen nursing and helping the sick. Many young children died. She, with the assistants and the local volunteers, made arrangements for the burial and cremation as applicable for the dead refugees. Soon, one side of the river became a cremation ground and the other a graveyard. Nearly 3,500 people (many of them children) died in Ampati and the surrounding camps. Amidst the unfolding tragedy of death, in the Ampati camp, there emerged the remarkable story of this noble, compassionate woman, who tried her best to alleviate the condition of these suffering exiles.



Rawshan Ara Begum Sangma, a benevolent lady with a difference.

After the victory in Bangladesh, all the refugees returned to Bangladesh and the kind woman, along with the Garos bade a tearful farewell to them. Social workers were able to collect the names of about 800 people, who had died at Ampati, but the details of several new born and very small children could not be ascertained. The figure of 3,500 deaths was obtained from the refugees, families of the dead and the local people of Ampati and surrounding areas.

Thirty-nine years after independence, while inquiring about the kind woman in Meghalaya, I had the opportunity of meeting her then 6-year-old

son, who told me that the name of his mother was Rawshan Ara Begum Sangma. She had died in 2009. The son was none other than Dr Mukul Sangma, the current Chief Minister of Meghalaya, who used to accompany his mother to the refugee camps and advised to eat with the children to learn about human compassion. It was Dr Sangma who recounted this episode to me.



Location of the refugee camps of 1971 near Ampati village.

Bangladesh honoured Rawshan Ara Begum Sangma with Friends of Liberation War Honour on 27 March 2012, a belated effort to do justice to her glorious compassionate and humanitarian service. There still remains the urgent task to uncover significant, yet forgotten contributions of private citizens, who supported our struggle for independence. Only then, can we truly honour such selfless acts of compassion and remarkable courage.

The Ampati graveyard and cremation site can hardly be recognized today. There is a need to construct a memorial there for our present and future generations to visit and learn about the history of the camp, which may otherwise fade away. We also have a solemn obligation to remember our citizens, who died in large numbers there.

ASGAR BALUCH

A SOLDIER AND SURVIVOR

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

In the early days of 1971, the 33 Baluch Regiment of the Pakistan Army was stationed at Kharian Cantonment, in West Pakistan. In May 1971, the regiment was ordered to move to Comilla Cantonment for conducting operations in Bangladesh. The regiment comprised mostly of Punjabi soldiers, although there were a few Baluchi soldiers as well. Among the Baluchis, Sepoy Mohammed Asgar Baluch came from a village near Quetta. He reached Comilla Cantonment in June that year. The 33 Baluch Regiment was placed under the 27 Infantry Brigade, which at that time was also stationed at the cantonment. Its area of operation was the border area of Kashba.

Asgar Baluch was greatly disturbed by what he had witnessed during the mass killing and rape of Bengali civilians by men from his own regiment. It reminded him of similar acts of terror that was perpetrated by the Pakistan Army, in Baluchistan. He too had grown up hearing about General Tikka Khan infamously nick named, 'The Butcher of Baluchistan'. Asgar realized that the Butcher of Baluchistan had now become The Butcher of Bangladesh.

In July 1971, Asgar decided to defect from his regiment. Under the cover of the night, while on patrol duty he quietly escaped from the cantonment with his rifle and ammunition. He walked for miles until he reached Sundarpur, a village in Barura, in Comilla. In the early morning hours, just after the Fajr prayer, he met Mohammad Kala Miah near the village mosque.

Kala Miah was surprised and alarmed at the sight of the solitary armed Pakistani soldier in the area. Asgar Baluch told Kala Miah who he was, expressed his intentions and asked for his protection. Kala Miah could speak and understand a little Urdu. He decided to trust the young Baluch and brought him home. Once there, Kala Miah spoke to the village edders about Asgar. Villagers of Sundarpur had thrown their support behind the Liberation War and were actively supporting the freedom fighters. They decided to trust Asgar Baluch.

At that time, there was a fortified base camp in Barura run by the freedom fighters, who had trained in the Nirbhoypur sub-sector in India. When Kala Miah approached this group of freedom fighters about Asgar, they all agreed to allow Asgar to stay in Sundarpur. Asgar handed over his weapon and ammunition to the freedom fighters. When they requested that Asgar join them, he declined, saying he had witnessed enough cruelty and could not bear the thought of participating in yet military campaign. However, he assured the fighters that he would assist and support them in any way he could.

Asgar Baluch settled in Kala Miah's house. He began dressing like the Bengali men in lungis and became very fond of the local cuisine. On the advice of the villagers, Asgar changed his name to Nabi Baksh. Later, he married Kala Miah's eldest daughter, Mosammat Joidunnessa. He also began to learn the local dialect and land cultivation.

In December 1971, after the country was liberated, with help of the local freedom fighters, Asgar sent a letter through the International Red Cross office in Comilla to his mother, in Baluchistan. He wrote to his mother about what had happened, about his new life and his marriage. He added

that the Bengali people, amongst whom he had found a home, had accepted him, and that he was happy and safe with his family.

A few months later, Asgar received a reply from his mother through Red Cross. His mother was happy and pleased to know no matter where her son was that he was alive, happy, and safe. She had nothing more to ask from Allah—the eternal prayer of all mothers for the safety of their children.



Asgar Baluch's family members.

Asgar Baluch not only worked on the land during his lifetime, but he also ran a small paan shop. With his first wife, he had five children. He got married a second time to Sabia Khatun, the eldest daughter of Aziz Miah of Barura Bazar. Asgar Baluch maintained both his families until his death. Since June 2003, his second wife, with whom Asgar lived until he passed away, has been receiving a small allowance from the Bangladesh

government. Both the wives of Nabi Baksh alias Asgar Baluch and all his children are still alive.

In an extraordinary chain of circumstances, in the midst of a war that claimed the lives of so many and exposed the brutality of the Pakistan Army against a civilian population, a young man from Baluchistan ended up in Bangladesh. His memories and the tragic history of his people, combined with his conscience, gave him the courage to stand up against his own army. Amidst fear and suspicion, hate and anger, hostility and desperation he took a tremendous risk to confide in and seek help from *Asgar Baluch* complete strangers. In turn, an embattled village made the decision to trust the enemy, and accept him as one of their own, despite differences in language, culture, and custom. This act of valour by a Baluchi soldier to reach out and identify with a people, who he was ordered to crush, and the reciprocal courage demonstrated by those who accepted him, is a remarkable example of defiance, and underscores the best of humanity, even during the worst excesses of war. As we continue in our struggle to learn about our history and our tragic past, these stories of ordinary people and their extraordinary acts should act as humbling and inspiring reminders of what we as a people, despite our differences, can be capable of, even in dire circumstances. Asgar Baluch, a foreigner caught in the midst of a war, listened to his conscience and made a decision that changed his life and the lives of those around him. Kala Miah and all those unknown villagers in a single act of generosity, defined for us what as a nation we should aspire to be. Only by recognizing the legacy of these courageous human beings and their faith in humanity in the face of adversity, and by aspiring to live by their examples of defiance, acceptance, compassion, and conscience, can we honour the memory of Asgar Baluch, a stranger, who chose to be a Bangladeshi, and the people who embraced him as their own.

BRUTALIZED A TAMIL FAMILY

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTİK

Doreswami Naidu was born in a humble family, at Kaium Betur, a village in southern Tamil Nadu. His father's name was Arekum Naidu. He was a farmer and was involved in the collection and disposal of animal bones.

Doreswami Naidu was married to Rosemary Naidu of the same village. In search of a better life, Doreswami and his wife travelled to Calcutta, in 1948. He received training in a leather factory, there. At that time, he learned that leather factories were being set up in Dacca. He decided to go to Dacca for better employment prospects. In 1952, along with his wife and two children, Rosina Naidu and Marselina Naidu, he came to Dacca. He joined the S.N. Tannery in the Hazaribag area, as a leather technician. In 1963, he purchased two *kathas* of land in the Sialbari area, of Mirpur and built a small house.

Over time, Doreswami Naidu was able to build a small house on his land. He was an extremely polite and kind person. Belonging to the Christian faith, he would attend all religious celebrations of Muslims and Hindus of the locality. He lived in an impoverished neighbourhood, and was well-known for helping the poor and needy. He was friendly with his

neighbours and was always prepared to assist them in their time of need. He also learned to speak Bangla fluently.

During the political movement of 1970 and in the early days of 1971, Doreswami Naidu used to engage in discussion with the people of his neighbourhood about the state of affairs. He supported and financed the ongoing democratic movement. In early March, the Bengalis of the Sialbari area were humiliated and tortured by the non-Bengali population. The latter were unhappy with Doreswami Naidu, as he was friendly with the Bengalis in the area.



Shaheed Doreswami Naidu

From 1 March 1971, a large number of armed non-Bengali people of Mirpur area surrounded the Bengali population. It became increasingly difficult and dangerous for the Bengalis to go to the market to purchase food and other essentials. They were living in a state of fear and uncertainty. At that time, Doreswami Naidu was regularly seen carrying food and distributing them among the poor Bengali residents. His efforts

were soon noticed by the non-Bengalis who, by this time, aided by the Pakistan Army had become more aggressive.

After the crackdown by the Pakistan Army on 26 March 1971, the condition of Bengalis in Sialbari further deteriorated. They were being subjected to a genocide. The helpless Bengalis were isolated and for many of them Naidu was their only benefactor. However, the non-Bengalis in the area were watching him.

On 29 March at around 1 p.m., when Naidu was carrying some food for a neighbour, a number of armed non-Bengalis, surrounded him. The people in the area watched in silence, but no one dared come to his rescue, as the mob that surrounded him belonged to the infamous Aktar Gunda and Jumman Kasai gangs. Actively encouraged and patronized by the Pakistan Army both these gangs slaughtered people in Mirpur and the surrounding areas. The gangs dragged him to a distance and some people in the area saw that the savages cut his hand first and then slaughtered him on the road and took away his body.

Neighbours, who had witnessed the gruesome murder, informed his family. The members of the Naidu family watched in horror as a few armed non-Bengalis entered their house. They ordered the family to go with them; they were escorted to a two-storied building on the northeast side of the Prince Iron Factory of Sialbari, where they were locked up. That night, after the non-Bengalis left, Rosemary Naidu tied her saree to the railing of the balcony and managed to escape with her children. The family rushed to their home, but the neighbours advised them against staying there, as the non-Bengali gangs, would return looking for them. By now, the green fields of Sialbari were filled with corpses. The Naidu family never found the body of Shaheed Doreswami Naidu.

Left with no choice, the Naidu family took shelter in the house of a family, who had come from Bombay, many years ago and were living in plot no. 2/7/40 in Sialbari. Rosemary thought this family being non-Bengali would give them protection. However, the following day, a number of young people were slaughtered in the area. The family informed Rosemary that it was not safe for them to stay in their house. After a brief discussion,

they took them to the jungle, on the northern side of Sialbari. They stayed in the jungle, hiding for few days and then moved to another part of the forest, on the eastern side of Dacca zoo. It was impossible to stay longer in the jungle, as the children were getting sick and there was no food. After a few days, Rosemary took her children to an adjacent village, inhabited by Bengalis and begged for assistance. There, her family members and Rosemary worked as housemaids, until the country was liberated. Throughout the nine months, the family fervently prayed every night for the liberation of Bangladesh, like any other Bengali family. Due to malnutrition and hunger, all the family members had become emaciated. They had to deal with a very difficult future, but they were brave enough to face the odds. They struggled with fear, but did not resign to destiny. It is not difficult to fathom the pain they had endured during the period, but with the spirit of their soul, they mastered courage and struggled to survive.

After the surrender of the Pakistan Army on 16 December 1971, the non-Bengalis and collaborators refused to surrender and put up resistance in the Mirpur area. Finally, on 31 January 1972, the collaborators of Pakistan Army were forced to surrender to the Mukti Bahini and Mirpur was liberated. The Naidu family returned to their home, which had been destroyed. They heard the tragic stories of their neighbours, who had escaped from Sialbari and like the Naidu family, every family had been subjected to inhuman atrocities.

Many friends of the family advised Rosemary Naidu to return to India, to her motherland, but the family decided to stay in Bangladesh, the land where Doreswami Naidu was killed. They have never returned to Tamil Nadu. Their life has become inseparable from the people of Bangladesh. The bonding they had with Bangladesh was never severed. They made a choice to identify themselves as Bangladeshis.

BATTLE OF MAHALCHORI AND SHAHEED CAPTAIN AFTAB QADER, BIR UTTAM

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

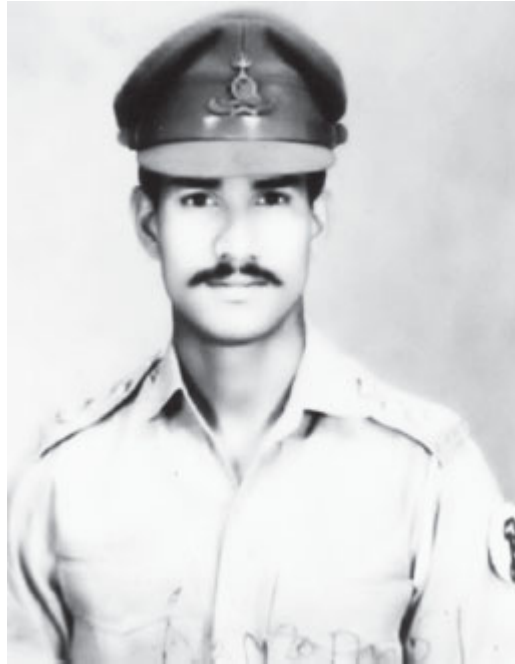
Pakistan Army units were conducting extensive operations since 26 March 1971 against Mukti Bahini positions all over Bangladesh. One of their main thrusts was near Ramgarh, a bordering thana in Rangamati district. To protect Ramgarh, Mukti Bahini forces had taken up a defensive position in the Mahalchori area. From early April, Mukti Bahini operations were being directed from Ramgarh and the surrounding areas which were liberated zones up to the fourth week of April. The Pakistan Army desperately wanted to recapture this area.

To take control of Ramgarh, the Pakistan Army engaged troops to advance through a number of axes, including Mirerswarai, Korerhat, Hathhazari, Nazirhat-Hiako and Rangamati-Mahalchori routes. In addition, after winding up defences in other areas, a part of 8 East Bengal Regiment (EBR), along with soldiers of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), volunteers – mainly students – reached Mahalchori, through Kaptai and Rangamati. They decided to take a defensive position in the Mahalchori area, to prevent the Pakistan Army from capturing Ramgarh. Major Mir Shawkat Ali who

was in command of the Mahalchori defences learned about the advance of the Pakistan Army towards his position.

In the early hours of 27 April, he sent Havildar Abu Taher, with a reconnaissance patrol, to verify the position and the direction of the army's advance. After conducting his reconnaissance, Havildar Abu Taher informed Major Shawkat that detachments of the 3 Commando Battalion of the Pakistan Army, along with thousands of Mizo soldiers were rapidly advancing towards Mahalchori. He also informed him that the commandos would land from helicopters. Captain Khalequzzaman, Captain Aftab Qader, and Lieutenant Mahfuz were alerted in their positions in the high grounds, ahead of Mahalchori Bazaar.

The defence was organized with two companies, under the command of Captain Khalequzzaman and Captain Aftab, and the company under Lieutenant Mafuz was positioned in depth. Major Shawkat took position near the Mahalchori dak-bungalow. At around 10 a.m., one company of the Pakistani Army's 3 Commando Battalion, along with 1,500 Mizo soldiers made contact with Captain Khalequzzaman's company. A fierce fire-fight broke out between the two forces. It is worthwhile to mention that for years the Pakistan Army had been training the Mizo rebels, providing them with arms, ammunition, and logistics and infiltrating them into India to fight against Indian security forces and the Indian Army. The Mizo leader Laldenga, who proclaimed himself as the commander of the Mizo army, had also declared himself as President of Mizoland. The 3 Commando Battalion was in charge of training the Mizos in the dense jungles of Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Mizo leadership Shaheed Captain Aftab Qader, Bir Uttam. had committed and placed their resources and manpower at the disposal of the Pakistan Army to fight against the Mukti Bahini. The best fighting unit of the Mizos was called the 'Lion Brigade', which consisted of 1,500 Mizos, who were armed with the same weapons as infantry units of the Pakistan Army. The Mizos also had a number of female soldiers in their brigade.



Shaheed Captain Aftab Qader, Bir Uttam.

The joint forces of the Lion Brigade and a company of the 3 Commando Battalion attacked the position of Captain Khalequzzaman with all their might. After some time, the captain's company, under covering fire, readjusted its position on the other side of the Chengi canal, braving heavy mortar and machine gun fire. Meanwhile, the Mizos also attacked Captain Aftab Qader's position, which now was the forward company. This company fought hard from higher ground and caused sizeable casualties to the Mizo soldiers. After three hours of hard fighting, the battle almost came to a standstill, as Pakistani soldiers and Mizos failed to make any headway. Under cover of mortar fire, the company commander of the 3 Commando Battalion, ordered the Mizos to launch a frontal attack against the Mukti Bahini positions on higher ground, which again failed. As the intensity of the battle increased, another company of the 3 Commando Battalion was being heli-dropped, behind the advancing Lion Brigade. Violating all ethics and rules of conduct of battle, the Mizos were ordered by the company commander of the 3 Commando Battalion to go forward in waves and attack the Mukti Bahini positions repeatedly, in broad daylight. Over megaphones, Pakistan Army officers were heard shouting to the Mizos that

if any of them withdrew, they would be killed by the commandos, who were positioned at their rear. The Mukti Bahini, which was holding on to the high ground repulsed successive assaults and caused heavy casualties to the Mizos. By noon, as the Mizos made no progress, the 3 Commando Battalion forward company commander, ordered the evacuation of the Mizo dead, lying in the open. Later, the Mizos were once again ordered to continue the assault. Left with no other alternative, the Mizo soldiers renewed their attack, although their morale was largely shattered. They were able to make some advance and occupied bits of high ground, from where they had a better view of the Mukti Bahini positions. Due to the prolonged firefight, the ammunition supply of the Mukti Bahini was by then greatly reduced.

Captain Aftab's company being the forward-most company bore the brunt of holding on to the defences. He was in the forward trench, on the right side of the company position, on higher ground. The air-cooled Vickers medium machine gun on his left, brought by the EPR soldiers was causing heavy casualties on the enemy. Suddenly, the machine gun stopped firing due to a mechanical malfunction. Taking advantage of the situation, the Mizos followed by the commandos reached within 300 meters of the Mukti Bahini position.

Major Shawkat watched the ominous situation from his position, near the dak bungalow and shouted to Aftab, 'The machine gun is not firing, tell your light machine gunners to keep firing rapidly or we are all finished today.'

The situation was further aggravated as the mortar fire from the enemy intensified. A number of shells fell near the position of the light machine gun and the gunner lost his nerve to continue firing as he appeared to be in temporary shell shock. Aftab saw the Mizos in black uniform, followed by commandos, within 200 yards of his position, trying hard to reach higher ground. The time had come for Aftab to jump into action, within seconds, he picked up his Sten gun. He asked the students, Fazlur Rahmam and Shawkat, who were in the trench with him, to hold on the position and keep

firing at the enemy. Then, through heavy enemy shooting, he sprinted and reached the light machine gun post.

Everyone watched Aftab's move with spellbound admiration. He took control of the light machine gun by pushing aside the shell-shocked gunner. With pinpoint accuracy, he began firing at the enemy. Mukti Bahini soldiers saw about twenty dead Mizos, who fell in the line of the light machine gun fire. The Mizos tried to advance further, but Aftab being an efficient machine gunner was mowing them down. He emptied magazine after magazine and the enemy was seen retreating, as no threats of the Pakistani commandos helped. Aftab picked up the light machine gun, got out of the trench, kept advancing, and came to the edge of the high ground. He was still causing heavy casualties on the fleeing enemy. It appeared that his only mission was to destroy the foe, without a care for his own life. He exposed himself to the enemy by moving forward and firing at them from a vantage point.

Suddenly, a burst of bullets hit Aftab in the chest. He shouted, 'I have been hit,' and fell to the ground.

The amazed Mukti Bahini soldiers were in a state of utter disbelief. Seeing him in action, they thought that Aftab was invincible and were shocked to see him fall. They ran towards him and heard his last words, 'Ma'.

The soldiers present did not understand if he called for his mother or his motherland or both, before he breathed his last. By this time, the Mizos and commandos had withdrawn from the battlefield.

The battle of Mahalchori was over. The victory of the day for Mukti Bahini came at the cost of the life of Captain Aftab Qader. This battle has become an important part of the history of the Liberation War. The significant achievement of the battle was that after suffering heavy casualties, the Mizos refused to take part in any major operation, alongside the Pakistan Army. Their leaders were not prepared to endure so many casualties caused due to frontal attacks in broad daylight and being inhumanly treated by the Pakistan Army.

Shaheed Captain Aftab Qader was awarded the Bir Uttam for his gallant action in the battle of Mahalchori on 27 April 1971. He demonstrated loyalty to his comrades and exhibited extraordinary courage and leadership under stress—a commendable performance.

MURDER AND MAYHEM AT GANDHI ASHRAM

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

In 1946, after communal riots broke out in Bihar, Calcutta, and Noakhali, Mahatma Gandhi undertook extensive tours in the riot torn areas to bring peace and communal harmony. He came to Ramganj in Noakhali on 7 November 1946, after severe communal riots had broken out there. One of the worst places of atrocities was Ramganj, where roughly 132 people were killed. He camped in Chandipur village, which was another badly affected area. He stayed in a tin-roofed house, which was called ‘Rajbari’, for a month. From this house, he started his *padayatra* to 49 villages and preached the message of peace and harmony, among the masses. After a month, he continued his journey to other areas of Noakhali, for a further three months, with the aim preaching peaceful coexistence and non-violence. He worked with the communities to build confidence and peace. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Jayog on 29 January 1947, all sections of the local community extended him their whole-hearted support.

After nearly four months, on 2 March 1947, when riots in Bihar broke out, Mahatma Gandhi left Noakhali. A camp was set up in Kazirkhil village, near Ramganj, for coordinating the efforts for maintaining and

spreading peace and harmony, in accordance with his instructions. This camp was called Gandhi Camp. The Mahatma's associates, who worked with him during the four months, included Charu Chowdhury, Reddi Palli Satya Narayan, Devendra Narayan Sarkar, Madan Mohan Chattopaddhay, Jibon Krishna Saha, Ajit Kumar Dey and others. Also among them were Kanu Gandhi (best remembered as Gandhi's photographer), Abha Gandhi, Mridula Gandhi (widely known as Manuben Gandhi), and Bibi Amtus Salam (a woman from Patiala, Punjab). Before his departure, Gandhi instructed the leaders to continue the peace building process and preserve harmony amongst the local population. Gandhi's comrades continued the process of peace-building and providing relief to the affected families. Later, as proposed by Barrister Hemant Kumar Ghosh, a permanent ashram was set up in Jayog village, as this was the place where Gandhi received tremendous support for his mission. Barrister Hemant Kumar Ghosh had decided to donate his entire property to the ashram, instead Gandhi advised him to use his funds for development of the poor in the area. The barrister formed a charitable trust in the name of his parents, the Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust, which was registered in 1949. After the death of Gandhi, 2,600 acres of land which had originally been given by Barrister Ghosh, had now reduced to a mere 23 acres.

After the Pakistani Army enforced martial law on 7 October 1958, the volunteers of Gandhi Ashram were constantly harassed, a number of false cases were filed against them, and many of were arrested and imprisoned. Attempts were made to coerce them to leave, but many of the volunteers remained at the ashram. Land grabbers and anti-social elements forcefully took away the properties belonging to the ashram, making it almost impossible to continue its activities. The head of the ashram, Charu Chowdhury, was detained in jail several times, between 1963-71. He was eventually released in 1971, after the independence of Bangladesh.

In 1971, after the crackdown by the Pakistan Army, Gandhi Ashram continued its humanitarian work of helping the poor and victims of the war. But fear persisted and the minority communities in the area also became victims of genocide. On 4 September, at around 11 a.m., the ashram was

surrounded and the ruthless Pakistani Army and their collaborators entered and shot dead the following people:

1. Devendra Narayan Sarkar joined Mahatma Gandhi immediately on his arrival to Noakhali. He stayed back in the ashram on Gandhi's instructions. When the army entered, he was reciting his prayers on the roof of the ashram, where he was shot dead.
2. Madan Mohan Chattopaddhay was also killed along with Sarkar.

In addition, the following volunteers, who served in the ashram were also gunned down:

1. Jibon Krishna Saha joined Gandhi in the peace march of 1946. He was engaged in development and peace activities in Bamni village, under Raipur police station. As the Pakistan Army and their collaborators were looking for him, he went to Sylhet where he was captured and killed.
2. Ajit Kumar Dey joined the Liberation War and took part in a number of operations, in the Panchgaon area. The collaborators killed him immediately after liberation.

The Pakistan Army looted the ashram and took away all the valuable assets, including the doors and windows. They also burnt all the books and historical documents found on the premises. A part of the ashram was also damaged.

After independence, Charu Chowdhury began reorganizing the ashram and freed some of the land and properties from the land grabbers. In 1974, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave instructions for the restructuring and legalizing of the Gandhi Ashram and the file was processed for approval. It took final shape with the gazette notification of the Bangladeshi government on 2 October 1975, where 'Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust' was renamed the 'Gandhi Ashram Trust', which included the Gandhi camp and Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust. The purpose of the ashram was to work mainly in the areas of rural development and human rights.

The ashram was made autonomous and a committee, with representatives from both the Bangladeshi and the Indian governments was formed to run the activities of the trust. The chairman of the trust was Justice Debesh Bhattacharya; other trustees included Deputy Commissioner of Noakhali, country head of State Bank of India in Bangladesh, Principal of Noakhali Government College, Bishwaranjan Sen (Gandhi's disciple), Reddi Palli Satya Narayan (Gandhi's disciple), and Charu Chowdhury (Gandhi's disciple and trustee secretary).



Gandhi Ashram Trust, which also houses the Gandhi Memorial Museum.

CHAWK HALDI

THE VILLAGE OF WIDOWS

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

Jathibhanga is a small village, under the Sutrapur union, in Thakurgaon Sadar. In 1971, Jathibhanga had a narrow road going over a small bridge, which connected to Thakurgaon town. Under the bridge, flowed the Pakhraj river, where about three thousand people were brutally killed by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators, during the nine-month Liberation War.

On 23 April 1971, 350 unfortunate women were widowed. The maximum number of people killed were from nearby Chawk Haldi village and since then the place has been called, ‘The Village of the Widows’ (*Bidhoba Polli*).

After the army crackdown of 26 March 1971, initial resistance movements started all over Bangladesh. From 26 March the people of Thakurgaon and surrounding areas, along with East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) forces took control and ensured that Thakurgaon was free until 18 April. On 19 April, the Pakistani Army attacked and the freedom fighters had to retreat, as they were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. Needless to add,

the people in the were extremely anxious and panic broke out, when the atrocities committed by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators began.

People from twelve surrounding villages of Jathibhanga, including Chawk Haldi, Jagannathpur, Chondipur, Alampur, Gauripur, Milanpur and Shingia planned to leave for India to save their lives. Many of them were Hindus. They began their towards the border on 22 April, and reached the outskirts of Jathibhanga in the evening. The women and children were tired after the long walk and so the people in the column decided to camp for the night on the banks of the river. The collaborators passed on the information that a large number of people were moving towards the Indian border to the army authorities in their camp in Thakurgaon. Early in the morning of 23 April, the army commander ordered the collaborators to stop the column at the bridge, and prevent them from travelling any further. The villagers found armed men occupying the bridge and slowly surrounding them. The collaborators ordered the people to stay put in the field, near the river. Confused and worried, the people begged the collaborators to allow them to proceed, however their pleas fell on deaf ears.

At around 2 p.m., a Pakistani Army contingent arrived and immediately occupied the bridge and surrounding high grounds. They sited their automatic weapons at positions of vantage and within minutes without so much as a warning started firing at the people. Simultaneously, the collaborators stationed near the bridge also opened fire. Bodies of slain men, women and children began littering the ground and those who hadn't been shot escaped across the fields. These innocent and unarmed people were abandoned to their fate and slaughtered by the hundreds. The river was filled with dead bodies and the water turned red. Soon, the green fields turned into a quagmire of blood, guts and gone. Meanwhile, the soldiers and the collaborators began looting the victims – mostly jewellery, money, and other useful items. The dead bodies were left in the fields to rot and be scavenged by animals. The people who had managed to escape and take shelter the bushes and nearby jungle, watched helplessly as the horrific butchery unfolded before them.

The people of Jathibhanga remember the day of the massacre with dread and sorrow. A memorial in honour of the victims of the genocide was built near the bridge with the initiative of the local people. On that day, 350 women from Chawk Haldi were widowed and reduced to a life of poverty and suffering. The widows of Jathibhanga still mourn the death of their family members. Even when the horror of war finally ended, these women received no solace and support. The sadness they experienced has never been alleviated. Many of them, maintain a stoic silence and refuse to engage with the past. The ones who speak out tell of a brief moment of history—of mindless cruelty and slaughter—imposed on their beloved ones.



A gathering of widows which was a common sight in many villages.

THE MASSACRE OF AN IMAM AND HIS FAMILY

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PATAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTOK

Boitapara is a small locality, under Bhandabo village. The village is located two kilometres east of Mollikbari union, under Bhaluka upazilla of Mymensingh district.

Safiruddin Munshi lived in this village, with his extended family. He was the Pesh Imam of the Boitapara Mosque. Soft spoken and gentle, Munshi, was well respected and loved by all the villagers. In addition to being an Imam of the mosque, he also taught in the madrasa adjacent to the mosque. He was a very popular teacher too. He led a quiet and peaceful life, and lived off earnings from the small piece of land given to him in charity by the villagers for leading the prayers in the mosque and teaching in the madrasa.

Safiruddin Munshi had four children. They were a happy family. His brother Abdus Samad, his wife and their son lived next door.

In the early hours of 15 July 1971, like every other day, Munshi and his wife Nosimunessa were preparing for the Fajr (morning prayer). Suti Mondal, who was the muezzin of the mosque, was giving the Azaan – call for prayer. All of a sudden, the morning air was shattered by the sound of

gun shots and a few Pakistani soldiers were seen rushing towards the mosque. They found Mondal and thrashed him until he fell unconscious.

Simultaneously, a group of about 30 soldiers along with their local associates were spotted rushing towards the house of Safiruddin Munshi. They quickly surrounded the place. The orders were being issued by a man in khaki uniform, with two pips on his shoulders boards, meaning he was either a lieutenant or a subedar of the Pakistani Army. He was with a group of eight to ten people in civilian clothes—their faces covered. They were the local collaborators, who did not want to be identified and hence had masked their faces. The collaborators were seen advising the army commander. Safiruddin Munshi and his family were ordered to come out of their home. When Munshi, Nosimunnesa, Abdus Samad and his wife Khadeja Begum came out of the house, they were ordered to line up in the courtyard. The commander spoke in Urdu and a collaborator translated his words into Bengali.

The collaborator shouted, ‘You are an associate of the freedom fighters. They are hiding in your house.’

Denying the charge, Safiruddin said he was not an associate of the freedom fighters and that he was not harboring any body. They could check for themselves, if they wantd to. He further explained that he was an Imam and would never lie. However the collaborators continued shouting and saying that they had proof that the family was linked to the freedom fighters. Both the Imam and his brother tried to plead their innocence, swearing by the Holy Quran, but nothing could change the mind of the army officer. The soldiers took position and within seconds shot dead all four members of the family. Khadeja Begum had a two-year-old daughter called Rokeya Begum. She came crawling to her mother for milk, but a collaborator picked her up and threw her into a pile of paddy straw. She survived miraculously.

Abdul Karim, the fifteen-year-old son of Abdus Samad, watched the cold-blooded murders from the window of his room. He was a brave and strapping lad, unable to take it anymore, he grabbed a kitchen knife, rushed

towards a soldier and stabbed him in the stomach. Instantly, Karim was shot dead by a soldier standing nearby.

After completing their brutal task, the Pakistani soldiers and their collaborators burnt down Munshi's house and threw their dead bodies into the flames. They then left the village.

In the evening, the villagers who had run away came to the gutted house of the Imam. They found that the dead bodies were charred beyond recognition. To their horror, they also found the charred remains of five sets of the Holy Quran, which the Imam used to recite prayers. The scene was beyond comprehension.

That evening, the villagers buried the five dead in a compound on the banks of the Rupi rivulet.

Until then the villagers did not know why the killing had taken place. Later, they learned that a group of freedom fighters who were travelling along the river at night stopped by the Imam's house for some food. Safiruddin Munshi and his family offered the hungry young men some *dal* and *bhat*. Never would the fighters have imagined that the Imam and his family would have to pay the highest price for this generosity.

The people of the village still mourn the death of the Imam. Such sorrow is not something that will evaporate with time.

FIRST CASUALTY OF NIAZI'S CRUELTY

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

Major Abu Yusuf Mushtaq Ahmed was born on 1 January 1935, in Comilla. He was commissioned on 17 September 1954, with the others of the 10 Pakistan Military Academy Long Course and was posted to the Baluch Regiment. Later, he was posted to the East Bengal Regiment (EBR). He served as Adjutant of East Pakistan Cadet College (now Faujdarhat Cadet College). After successful completion of the staff college course, he was posted as an instructor to the Infantry School at Quetta. By this time he had achieved a formidable reputation as a professional soldier.

In November 1970, a decision was taken at the Army Headquarters, in Rawalpindi, for the raising of 9 EBR. The troops recruited were mostly Bengalis, who were sent to the East Bengal Regimental Centre (EBRC), in Chittagong Cantonment for training. Major Mushtaq, Second-in-Command of 1 EBR, located at Jessore Cantonment, was posted as Officiating Commanding Officer of 9 EBR. At the end of November, 1 EBR was deployed out of Jessore Cantonment for operational duties. The major visited all the locations of the companies and bid farewell to the soldiers and officers. Captain Mohammad Ainuddin, who was serving with 4 EBR in Comilla, was also posted to 9 EBR, as staff officer of the battalion. Major Mushtaq, on assumption of officiating command of the 9 EBR under

raising, was busy organizing the battalion and visiting his recruits in EBRC. For most of the time, he had to stay on in Dacca Cantonment to conduct his tasks.



Major Abu Yusuf Mushtaq Ahmed

On 2 April 1971, the Chief of Army Staff, General Abdul Hamid Khan summoned the commander of 10 Pakistan Infantry Division, based in Lahore, Major General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. On 3 April, the two men met, General Hamid informed Major General Niazi that President Yahya Khan was not fully satisfied with the on-going operation in East Pakistan. He quoted President Yahya Khan as saying that although Niazi was junior to a number of generals, however considering his service record and operational experiences under adverse conditions, he was selected to replace Lieutenant General Tikka Khan as the Commander of Eastern Command. When Niazi was asked to give his opinion on the matter, he replied that it is the duty of every soldier to obey the orders of his superiors. He expressed his gratitude to the President for entrusting him with this responsibility. He was ordered to move immediately to Dacca and assume charge of the Eastern Command. That day, Major General Niazi was

promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General. Incidentally, on two earlier occasions Niazi had been posted to East Pakistan and hence was familiar with the conditions there.

On 4 April, Lt General Niazi reached Dacca. Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Tikka Khan learned that he was being removed, it is a matter of shame for a commander to be relieved of his command during on-going operations. Lieutenant General Tikka Khan made repeated appeals to the Chief of Army Staff and other senior officers at Army Headquarters to not have him removed. Nothing worked, Headquarters was firm in its decision.

Tikka Khan tried hard for six days to remain in command, but his repeated pleas were ignored. Being unsuccessful, on 10 April, he handed over command to Lieutenant General Niazi. On 11 April, as a facesaving measure, Tikka Khan was posted as the Governor and Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan occupied Bangladesh. Simultaneously, a number of changes were made in senior appointments. Niazi was given almost a new set of officers under his command and it appeared it was done in accordance with his request to the Army Headquarters.

On 10 April at 4 p.m., after assuming command, in the Operations Room of Eastern Command, Niazi called for a meeting of his senior officers. He arrived wearing his side arm, which surprised the audience since everybody was expected to leave their weapons outside the room, before entering. He told the officers who were present that he had now taken over command and in future all officers in uniform would have to wear pistols everywhere.

To the surprise of several officers, Niazi suddenly became abusive and started talking in Urdu, '*Main is haramzadi qaum ki naksa badal doon ga. Yeh mujhe kya samajhtey hain?*' Meaning he would change the map of this bastard nation and they should know who he is. His words were meant for the Bengali people and unfortunately in that gathering a few Bengali officers were present. Niazi continued his outburst, saying that he would force his soldiers to lose their feminine attitude. Major Mushtaq Ahmed who was present at the meeting could not tolerate Niazi's harsh and uncalled for language. Fixing his eyes on the General, he said that such

profanities against his people was unacceptable and demanded that he take back his words. There was a stunned silence in the room and an angry Niazi stormed out.

Some of the sensible officers present were taken aback by the General's rant. However, there were a grins on the faces of some other West Pakistani officers. They were discussing in low voices how Major Mushtaq would face severe consequences for his arrogant reproach and that he did not know just whom he had a clash with. Cool and composed, Major Mushtaq left the room deflated. Everybody knew that Major Mushtaq on orders from his superiors was staying at the officers' mess and not at his home. After Operation Searchlight was launched, he was only able to visit his family on two occasions and that too for short spells. Four soldiers always escorted him wherever he went, and there were additional sentries posted at the gate of his house. His family never saw him with a weapon. It appeared as though he was under constant surveillance.

The next morning in the officers' mess, Major Mushtaq was found dead in his room. The mess was located on the eastern side of what is now Lieutenant Shaheed Anwar Bir Uttam Girls' School and College. His body was wrapped in a white sheet and taken to his home on a truck, with an escort. There was a hue and cry, as no one expected major Mushtaq's body to be brought have unannounced. The escorts informed the family members that the Major had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head, in a bathroom in the Eastern Command Headquarters. The family members made several requests for his body to be handed over to them for burial, but the escorts refused as they had no instruction to hand over the remains to the family. They were only allowed to see his face, after which the body was taken to an army graveyard at Banani and buried under army supervision. A rumour was spread that after General Niazi's diatribe, to which Mushtaq had protested, he became emotional and committed suicide.

It now dawned upon people why the army authorities had refused to hand over the body, since it would be discovered how Major Mushtaq had died. As family sources revealed, Major Mushtaq never carried a side arm and was under constant surveillance, so to suggest that he shot himself was

patently false. Besides, he was a disciplined, mature and stable person and the thought of committing suicide would never cross his mind. He was staying in the officers' mess, where most of the occupants were officers of the 13 Frontier Force (FF) Regiment. The 13 FF was camped in the fields, across the mess and was the strategic reserve of Eastern Command. It is widely believed that early in the morning a few officers of 13 FF entered Major Mushtaq's room and slit his throat. This would have been the best way to avoid the sound of gunshots coming from the officers' mess, which would surely have drawn unwanted attention. After the gruesome murder, elaborate steps were taken to effectively cover it up. The conspirators were also aware that during that time a pogrom had begun against Bengali troops stationed all over Bangladesh, and so no one would dare protest or raise questions.

A brilliant and brave officer, Major Mushtaq Ahmed had the moral courage to stand up and protest the insults hurled at his people and as a result paid a heavy price for it. He was the first casualty of Niazi's cruelty, which continued throughout the next nine months, resulting in the deaths of millions of innocent Bengalis. The brutal manner in which the Major was disposed off indicated that Niazi was the most suitable commander for overseeing mass murder in Bangladesh.

GRUESOME MURDERS AT THE SAYEDPUR RAILWAY WORKSHOP

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

In 1947 there was an exodus of Muslims, from Bihar and adjacent areas, into East Bengal. Many of them settled in the North Bengal town of Sayedpur. The local Bengalis offered complete support to help resettle the exiles there. However, the refugees lived a secluded life, and were largely indifferent towards the Bengalis.

They refused to participate and cooperate in any of the people's movements in the province, for decades between 1947-71. Instead, they joined hands with the Pakistani military junta in their vicious acts against the Bengalis. The non-Bengalis of the area began providing extensive support to the Pakistani Army, from the beginning of March 1971 and unleashed a reign of terror against the local population.

Inspired by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech on 7 March 1971, the Bengalis in Sayedpur began a non-cooperation drive against the Pakistani administration in the area. The Bengali workers, from Sayedpur Railway Workshop abstained from work as part of the on-going movement. On the other hand, the non-Bengalis organized themselves and with the support of the Pakistani soldiers from the barracks, began secretly training

themselves with arms and ammunition. The majority of the officers and workers in the railway workshop were non-Bengali, and soon they began intimidating their Bengali coworkers. The Pakistani military provided these non-Bengalis with secret information about the existing situation in the country. Consequently, Bengalis in this area which was populated mostly by non-Bengalis passed their days in fear and anxiety.

On 23 March, the non-Bengalis surrounded the Bengalis in Sayedpur, and took them hostage. Their lives were in grave danger. The news of the incident spread to nearby villages like wildfire. Soon, the atrocities being unleashed on the Bengalis reached the nearby villages through public address systems.

Mahtab Beg who was a political leader in Sayedpur at that time, led 5,000 villagers, carrying whatever tools and implements they could manage to get their hands on and marched towards Sayedpur to rescue the locked up Bengalis. The Pakistani soldiers along with their local non-Bengali cohorts assembled in the Sher-e-Bangla School, near the entrance of the town to halt the marching villagers. They opened fire on the villagers, and Mahtab Beg was hit by a bullet in the lower abdomen, gravely wounding him. His fellow villager, Mohammad Ali from Shatnala Union was also hit and died instantly. Mahtab Beg's son Mirza Salahuddin Beg was also among the injured. At that point, the non-Bengalis attacked the wounded Mahtab Beg with knives and killed him. They took away his body to Sayedpur. Meanwhile, the Pakistani soldiers blew whistles directing the non-Bengalis to move out from there. The non-Bengalis beheaded Mahtab Beg and marched through the streets with his head in jubilation, shouting that anyone who opposed the Pakistanis would face similar consequences.

Acts of violence against the Bengalis further increased after 23 March 1971. Since the Pakistani Army unleashed Operation Searchlight throughout East Pakistan on 25 March, the Bengalis in Sayedpur began to lead an uncertain life. They confined themselves to their homes.

On the evening of 26 March 1971, the non-Bengalis announced over the public address system for the last time that all Bengali officers and workers of the railway workshop must report for duty the following morning or they

would face dire consequences. The Pakistan Army from the Sayedpur Cantonment also made a similar announcement. The Bengalis had no alternative but to reach the workshop for fear of their lives.

M.A. Aziz, the store and accounts officer of the workshop, while entering the gate of the workshop was attacked and killed with knives by non-Bengalis. Besides being an officer, M.A. Aziz was also an LMF doctor. He used to treat poor people of the locality, including non-Bengalis, free of charge, and was known to be popular in the area. No one could believe that a benevolent and kind-hearted person like him could be killed so brutally, for no apparent reason. Within minutes, five more Bengali workers were killed in a similar manner inside the workshop gate.

The non-Bengalis stepped up their violence soon after this incident. Bengalis could not leave town, fearing that they would be killed on the way. Gruesome killings of the workers and outsiders took place on 14, 15 and 16 of April that year, inside the workshop. According to eyewitness accounts more than 350 people including officers, workers, and ordinary citizens from Sayedpur and villagers from the area were brought to the workshop and brutally murdered. The killers devised a cruel method to get rid of so many persons. They threw the helpless victims into the three large boilers and furnaces used to melt iron in the workshop. The people hurled in died instantaneously. Locals in the area could hear loud screams of the helpless souls being dragged to the boilers and furnaces. They were abandoned to their fate, and slaughtered in hundreds. No one came to save them. Since the victims were thrown into the high temperature burners, no evidence of their murder remained. The leaders of this killer mob, patronized by the Pakistani Army, included Matin Hashmi, Mohammad Habbu, Mohammad Zahid and other non-Bengali workshop workers. They did not pay heed to the pleadings of the innocent Bengalis, including those who had worked with them, and instead threw them into the burning fire. It appeared to many that the killing was done for sport.

The names of the 177 martyred persons are written on the Sayedpur Railway Shaheed Minar. Most of these people were killed inside the workshop. However, the names and details of persons, several of whom

were forcibly brought from the village and surrounding areas and murdered, are not known. They perished in the death machine forgotten.



A portion of the Sayedpur Railway workshop, with a burning furnace.

This gruesome chapter and unprecedented crime committed against so many innocent people in those three days needs to be recorded in our history. A monument in memory of those killed inside the workshop should be set up, if we wish to let the future generations know about the true history of the sacrifices made by the Bengalis in Sayedpur.

KILLING THE BEST BENGALI PILOTS OF PIA

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was the state-owned airline of the country. Pakistanis habitually created several hurdles to the recruitment of Bengalis, who wanted to join PIA. The negative attitude of the Pakistanis ensured that only a small percentage of Bengalis had the opportunity of joining the airlines, especially as pilots. Appointments, which were usually unimportant in nature and ones where West Pakistanis did not like to serve would be allocated to the Bengalis. The handful of Bengali pilots were kept under strict surveillance, to ensure that they could never organize themselves. Besides, they were also not posted to any sensitive locations or areas.

For several years the pilots attempted to counter the discrimination through the PIA Pilots Association. However, as they were few in number and did not hold influential positions in the association, their demands were never accepted. Left with no other alternative, the pilots formed their own association, but kept it clandestine. In early February 1971, Shahkur Ullah Durrani, the Managing Director of PIA came for a visit to Dhaka. A few Bengali pilots from the association met Durrani at Hotel Intercontinental,

and discussed with him the problems they were facing. Durrani listened to their grievances and advised them to submit their points in writing, which was done immediately. While no action was taken on their petition, Durrani was able to identify the persons who were raising their voices for their rights, which he was known to have passed on to the military authorities. As a youth Durrani served in the Pakistan Army for three years, as an officer and thereafter maintained regular liaison with the defence forces. As such, he passed on detailed information on the activities of the Bengali pilots, especially about the association members. At a later date the army would use this information to apprehend and eliminate the pilots and other errant officials of the PIA.

The Bengali pilots had formed an association called the East Pakistan Airlines Pilot Association (EPALPA). The first few meetings were secretly held in the house of Captain Alamgir, at 9/6 Iqbal Road, Mohammadpur, Dacca. This was noticed by the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence agency, and soon intelligence officials were seen watching the house, when the meetings were held.

Steps were taken for immediate registration of EPALPA to make it a legal entity. A committee of 10 members were formed, which included Captain W.R. Chowdhury, Captain Abdul Khaleque, Captain A.T.M. Alamgir, Captain Alamgir Sattar, Captain Zahir, Captain Rafi, Captain Abu Salem, Captain Monowar, Captain Khondkar, Captain Shahabuddin Ahmed, and Captain Zaman. The committee enjoyed the overwhelming support of all the Bengali pilots. Captain W.R. Chowdhury was elected as chairman and Captain Alamgir as the general secretary of EPALPA. The newly formed committee started functioning from a room in Awlad Hussain Market at Old Airport Road. Soon, a news bulletin, *Bihango Barta* edited by Captain Alamgir was being published.

Captain Khaleque, who was the vice chairman of the committee, was posted to Karachi. In the first week of February 1971, he returned from Karachi and informed the committee that a massive troop build-up had been set into motion and soldiers in civilian clothing were being flown into Dacca airport in large numbers from Karachi. Additional troops were being

flown from Lahore and Rawalpindi by special PIA flights via China and Burma. He also said that in his flight, other than him, all the passengers appeared to be from the army. He even had to fly sitting in the jump seat. Most of the flights were landing in Dacca, in the dead of night. He requested that this information be passed on to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Captain Sattar, who was assigned the task, went to Bangabandhu and briefed him about the troop movement. The arrival of troops started to be monitored by the EPALPA members and in the first week of March, Captain Shahab and Captain Sattar rushed to Bangabandhu's house and informed him about the details of the latest movement of troops. From 1 March 1971, restrictions were placed on all Bengali pilots and staff of PIA from entering the airport without specific clearance from the airport management. The routine activities in the airport were being conducted by West Pakistani and East Pakistani non-Bengali officers and staff. Protesting this order, EPALPA decided that no Bengali pilots would fly any aircraft. A few West Pakistani pilots were brought in, but they failed to meet the flight schedules. In the backdrop of this situation, Bangabandhu delivered his historic 7 March speech to the nation. The association started making plans to resist the Pakistani Army, as per Bangabandhu's directive. EPALPA officials prepared a plan consisting of 44 pages for forming a new airline on 22 March 1971. The association planned to hide a few small aircraft in abandoned runways so that they could be used by the resistance forces in the near future.

On the afternoon of 25 March around 4.30 p.m., some of the pilots saw General Yahya Khan leaving Dacca airport covertly. That night the Pakistani Army launched Operation Searchlight and simultaneously started raiding the houses of all the prominent Bengalis, including Bengali pilots. They were able to arrest Captain Sikander and immediately assassinated him. Later, from various locations in the city they arrested Captain Amirul Islam, Captain Alamgir, Captain N.S. Haider, and Deputy Managing Director (DMD) of PIA, Fazlul Haq Chowdhury. Only one pilot Captain Nazrul, who was in his village, survived. Other than the pilots and DMD, 23 other Bengali officers and staff of PIA were killed by the army. Among

the members of EPALPA, Captain Khaleque joined the Liberation War and was awarded the Bir Protik. Captain Alamgir Sattar was awarded the Bir Protik, while Captain Sahab received the Bir Uttam.

The Pakistanis had made a detailed plan to kill the best and most talented Bengalis, who if survived would provide leadership to a new independent nation. These men were arrested and no information reached their families, who waited in agony for their dear ones to return, which never happened. The Army killed the DMD and four of the best instructor pilots, so that they could not train any more Bengali pilots. The savage and bloodthirsty soldiers of the Pakistani Army took away their defenceless captives and eliminated them. Their mortal remains were never found, although several efforts have been made by the writer of this story for many years. These great sons of the soil would never fly on the winds of freedom and their souls still cry for justice.

OMAR FARUQ AND THE FLAG OF BANGLADESH

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

Omar Faruq was born on 12 March 1950, in Pirojpur, East Pakistan, to Sayedur Rahman Sharif and Kulsum Begum.

Omar was attracted to politics from the time he was a schoolboy. In 1966, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman came to Pirojpur, to address a public meeting in the town hall maidan. The meeting was aimed at rallying public opinion in favour of Bangabandhu Rahman's six-point demand. Moved by Bangabandhu's emotionally-charged speech, young Omar Faruq made a decision to participate in the six-point programme and joined the Chatra League.

By the end of 1967, Omar Faruq had become the leader of the Pirojpur sub-division Chatra League. He continued his political work during the movement of 1969 and the election of 1970. On 23 March 1971, he hoisted the Bangladeshi flag, at the Shaheed Minar, adjacent to the Town Hall of Pirojpur, attended by a huge crowd who had assembled to cheer the flag raising.

In a meeting of the All Party Students Front of Pirojpur on 24 April 1971, Omar prepared a plan to resist the Pakistan Army, in case they

advanced towards Pirojpur. On 26 March on receiving news of massacres in Dacca and other parts of the country, the people of Pirojpur broke out four revolvers, one hundred .303 rifles and 8,000 rounds of ammunition from the government armoury and began preparing for the defence of Pirojpur town. Faruq along with other newly formed groups of freedom fighters took up positions in and around the town area. The Pakistan Army attacked Pirojpur on 30 April and eventually was able to take control of the town by 3 May. Even though the freedom fighters resisted fiercely, they were outnumbered and outgunned. As the resistance fighters started withdrawing from the town area, Faruq was cut off from his group and went into hiding. On 29 May, he decided to move to India to join the Mukti Bahini training camp. He boarded a launch, however a policeman named Hanif, who worked at the Pirojpur police station, identified him. A number of collaborators of the Pakistani Army, along with Hanif apprehended Faruq and took him to the army camp in Barisal. He was abused and tortured when the army realized he was the first to raise the Bangladeshi flag in Pirojpur and was a member of the Pirojpur resistance.



Omar Faruq, he gave his life for the flag.

The Pakistani Army then decided to make an example of Omar. Weakened and broken by torture and the beatings, he was dragged before

the public, where they sliced a portion of his skull and inserted the flag of Bangladesh.

As he lay dying, the soldiers taunted him saying, 'You may now shout the slogan of Joy Bangla.'

When he died, his body was strung up on a tree for several days for the people to see.

In January 1973, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman came to Pirojpur and addressed the people in the same town hall maidan, where he had held the public rally years ago. He spoke at length about the killings of the Bengali population by the Pakistani Army and he made a special mention of Omar Faruq, who was killed for raising the flag of independent Bangladesh.

The barbaric killing of Omar Faruq is only one example of the thousands of Bangladeshis, who were tortured and killed by the army. It is a horrific reminder of how the Pakistani Army never stopped at anything to intimidate and defeat the spirit of independence of the people of Bangladesh.

REQUIEM FOR THE FALCON

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

On 18 October 2012, the Ekka family arrived in Dhaka to receive the Friends of Liberation War Honour award from Bangladesh. The first thing Balamdini Ekka asked me was if it would be possible for her to visit Gangasagar, where her husband Lance Naik Albert Ekka was martyred, during the Liberation War. I assured her that arrangements had already been made for the visit. Throughout the ceremony, which was held to honour the foreign nationals who had made invaluable contributions to our Liberation War, whenever she saw me, she repeated the same request. On the morning of 22 October, accompanied by her son Vincent Ekka, along with Colonel Ashok Tara and his wife, Balamdini began her journey to Gangasagar. Incidentally, Colonel Ashok Tara had also taken part in the battle of Gangasagar, as a company commander, and was awarded the Vir Chakra for this battle.

Lance Naik Albert Ekka of 14 Guards was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest military honour, for his gallantry in the war. Ekka was a man of humble means, born in the village of Jari in the district of Gumla in Jharkhand. He was a member of the Oraon tribe (Falcon tribe). Fittingly, he was a soldier of the legendary regiment of the

Brigade of Guards of the Indian Army, which has the Garuda as its regimental emblem.



The Param Vir, Lance Naik Albert Ekka

As a part of my research, I wanted to know more about Ekka and his family and had visited them in their village. During my discussions with Albert's widow, Balamdini, I learned that she always wanted to say a prayer at the place of her husband's death, but that her penury would never make the trip possible. Living on the five acres of land given to her family by the government, now in litigation, she made ends meet with her monthly pension. I could only assure her it would be my honour to make the necessary arrangements for her visit.

After I returned to Dhaka, I thought to myself that Albert Ekka, who fought and died for a cause greater than his own was also a father and a husband. And while the memory of his sacrifice has dimmed with the passage of time, his absence is still felt every day and grieved by the ones who loved him the most.

I could still hear Balamdini weeping bitterly and saying, 'I wish I could go to Gangasagar to say prayers for him.'

Her sorrow was something that had not evaporated with time.

Forty-one years had passed since Ekka's death, yet so few of us know of him and others like him. Death in performance of their duty brought

blessedness to them. For their untimely deaths, each of their families had asked for so little. I thought I should undertake this task with humility, urgency and a profound sense of honour and gratitude for a man, who had sacrificed his life for my country. It is our duty as a nation to honour Albert Ekka and ensure that his wife, Balamdini, is able to visit Gangasagar.

As a member of the national committee for honouring foreign nationals, who had made outstanding contributions towards our Liberation War, I submitted the citation on Albert Ekka. I recommended that he be honoured with Friends of Liberation War Honour to the committee, and explained my experience. The recommendation was accepted.

Throughout the five-hour journey, Balamdini was praying silently. At 12 o'clock, we reached Gangasagar, the brutal battle site of 1971, where Ekka's blood had mingled with the mud there. Stepping out of the vehicle, Balamdini touched my hand and said, 'Please take me to the place where he fell.' I took her and Vincent to the spot. There she bent and began her long silent prayer. Her hands were trembling and she was crying. A crowd began to gather and the prayer took a long time. Amongst the crowd, I could see a number of freedom fighters, who had taken part in that battle. Their eyes were moist, as they understood the tragedy that the family had experienced. After the prayer, we boarded our vehicle and all the way back Balamdini did not utter a single word.

The next morning, before leaving Bangladesh, she looked cheerful and happy. She told me that deep down in her heart she had longed to go to Gangasagar to pray, and God had given her that opportunity. She thanked everyone for giving her the comfort that she received from the visit.



The author with the family of the Fearless Falcon at his place of martyrdom.

The sacrifice of Albert Ekka, and his unflinching sense of ultimate duty are forever enmeshed in the history of our independence and I was happy to be of some service to his family.

Bangladesh is the outcome of the harvest of blood of many Ekkas. Let them not be ignored or forgotten. The time is now and always to remember such heroes.

THE FORGOTTEN RESTING PLACE AND THE TWO BROTHERS

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

They were two brothers—Afzal Hussain and Ahmad Hussain. If you had met them, you would see two *sharif* (gentle) and humble human beings. On a cold afternoon, in Shillong, I was walking through the Moprem graveyard, which in Khasi, the language of the indigenous Khasi people means, stone area. At the far end of the graveyard there was a large room, which my two elderly guides, Ahmed and Afzal Hussain, pointed out and said that was the place, where the bodies of the deceased were kept and bathed before the Janaza prayer.

As we walked through the silent graveyard, the brothers talked quietly about the history of this plot of land. In 1849, their forefather Golam Haider Molla had arrived in Cherrapunji from West Bengal to trade and within a short time had amassed a fortune. Initially, the British had their headquarters in Cherrapunji, which they later shifted to Shillong. Golam Haider subsequently also moved his business and began acquiring large properties there. In 1874, he generously donated this plot of land for use as a graveyard. Later, this graveyard became a Waqf property.

As we neared a long patch of land, covered with wild flowers and grass, the Hussain brothers pointed that this was the final resting place of our brave brothers of 1971, ‘We have buried them in a line in this area—all 52 of them.’

I stood there in solemn silence for some time. Here lay some of the brave freedom fighters of Bangladesh’s Liberation War. Yet, for 40 years, their graves had never been visited; no prayers were offered for the departed souls by anyone from their beloved motherland. Of the people who collected the bodies of the 52 freedom fighters, dug their graves and attended the Janaza prayer only a few were alive. Imam Hafez Ahmad Ali from Cachar district, who was the Imam of the Police Line Mosque in 1971, led the prayer for the dead. Muhammad Abdul Jalil, who was then the caretaker of the graveyard and was in charge of digging the graves, had passed away. The graveyard committee members—Mohibur Rahman, Mohammad Hanif and Jamshed Ali were also long gone.

At over 73 and 70 years of age respectively, Ahmed and Afzal were the last two with memories of those eventful days and who still visit the graveyard from time to time. In their passing, Afzal remarked, ‘No one will know the stories of the dead, and how they came to this resting place.’

We said a prayer for the departed souls, as the skies opened with heavy rains and we were enveloped in biting cold winds. The brothers embraced me, holding back tears. Then we walked back to a nearby mosque, which had now been refurbished.

‘It was in this mosque that the bodies of the dead were brought and where Imam Hafez Ahmed Ali led the Janaza prayer,’ recalled Afzal.

We drove away from the graveyard toward Shillong’s Army Hospital. It was here that the brothers were called in for a meeting in April 1971, and the colonel informed them that there were many wounded freedom fighters from Bangladesh being brought to the hospital for treatment. He was concerned that despite their best efforts, many would succumb to their injuries.

‘The dead must be honoured and buried with due respect’, he reminded them.

Further, as the chairman of the Police Line masjid committee and member of the Moprem graveyard committee, Ahmed and his brother Afzal, who was the chairman of Lawaris Laash Dafan Committee of Shillong, were to take responsibility for the discreet burial of the dead. Confidentiality, the colonel strongly emphasized, was imperative; otherwise panic would grip the peaceful tourist city.

The responsibility of burying the dead in secrecy required significant planning and careful execution. The Hussain brothers would bring their own vehicles for transporting the dead, which had to be done under the cover of darkness since the bodies would have to be carried through the streets of Shillong. There were no records or names of the dead, as the wounded were brought in without any identity papers from the battlefield. The Lawarish Laash Dafan Committee led by Ahmed Hussain would receive the dead bodies.

The brothers got to work the next day. The dead were almost always young, between 18 and 25 years of age, and one could still see their wounds and surgical procedures, a reminder of the valiant efforts by doctors who tried to save their lives.

‘So many times,’ Afzal recalled, ‘we talked amongst ourselves about how the families of the dead would never know where their near and dear ones have been buried.’

The Hussain brothers invited me for tea at their home, located in a beautiful area in Shillong, on MG Road. It was then that Ahmed talked about the challenge that the Moprem graveyard new faced. With the increase in the Muslim population, there was a pressing demand than ever before for burial plots. The committee had consequently decided that the area in which the 52 martyrs were buried would have to be used for new burials. In tears, both brothers observed that if new graves are made on the old graves, there will be no trace of the latter, and their families would never find them. They had pleaded with the graveyard committee for more time, but time is something they no longer had.

‘Can you please do something urgently?’ they requested, as if the men they had laid to rest were their own flesh and blood. If blood is the ultimate

price of freedom, these young men had paid more than their share. Don't they at least deserve to have their memories and the stories of their sacrifices be remembered?

As a freedom fighter of our Liberation War, for the last nine years, I have been working on and documenting the missing population of 1971. I have successfully located graves of missing freedom fighters in both Bangladesh and India. After locating the 52 graves, I had to move on to the next destination on which I had information. The following morning, before leaving Shillong, on the way to Guwahati Airport, I could not resist stopping at Moprem graveyard, one last time. Standing there again, I felt these young ones had died for me and for the generations to follow. And while they sleep today in that quiet graveyard, they were the spirit of the storm of 1971. They responded to the call of the nation; they fought, bled, and died in the quest for independence, and they were laid to rest respectfully in a foreign land, by kind strangers. As citizens of a free nation for which they fought and died, can we not pay our last respects to these valiant young men by bringing them back to the land they helped liberate? After 40 years in a stranger's land, honoured by the very few who care to remember, can they not finally return to this land of blood and tears? It is now time to bring them home. I felt deep gratitude to the Hussain brothers and a few others, who had so kind-heartedly made the effort of burying our dead and taking care of the graves for 40 long years, when none from Bangladesh ever visited and prayed for the departed souls. They are shining examples of good human beings with enormous compassion and love.



The author with the Hussain brothers at the Moprem graveyard.

Bangladesh awarded the two brothers with Friends of Liberation War Honour on 20 October 2012 – a step towards recognizing their selfless acts.

THE VICTIMS OF HALDERPUR VILLAGE

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

Halderpur is a small village in Hobiganj, located under number 7 Borojuri union of Baniachong police station. In 1971 it was the site of an aggressive Pakistani air attack that claimed the lives of many innocent lives. This is their story.

On 13 April 1971, Halderpur was in the midst of preparations for a wedding ceremony. The bride, Anowara Begum was 21 years old. She was born and brought up in London. While in London, her marriage was arranged to 26-year-old Dewan Shahid Miah, from Khusharhagaira, a village seven miles south of Halderpur. Dewan Shahid Miah was a teacher, in the local *maktab* (Islamic religious school). Halderpur was in celebratory mood that day. After a sumptuous lunch of biryani and rezala followed by dessert, the bride's family had arranged for a stick-fight, which was a very popular sport in the area. The field was full of people, who had come to enjoy the exciting contest.

A few minutes after the game started, a fighter aircraft of the Pakistan Air Force flew low over the field. The aircraft circled the field twice and then flew away. The villagers although curious, thought it was only a routine exercise and did not think much about it.

On 19 April, at 2 p.m., two Pakistani Saber Jets were spotted flying low in the eastern sky, at a high speed. People came out of their homes to see what the commotion was about. The jets turned around and once over the village, began firing rockets and shooting with machine guns. In a matter of seconds, missiles blasted through the village and fires broke out. The entire hamlet was almost razed to the ground. Dead bodies were littered everywhere. The panic-stricken and shell-shocked villagers, carried the wounded to the Thana Health Complex for emergency medical assistance.

On that day in 1971, eleven innocent villagers were killed and thirtytwo were wounded. The dead included:

1. Angura Khatun, 15-year-old student of the *maktab*, and daughter of Abdul Malek.
2. Mokbulunnesa, 40-year-old housewife, wife of Fazar Uddin.
3. Amena Khatun, 10-year-old student of primary school, and daughter of Fazar Uddin.
4. Angura Begum, 10-year-old primary school, student and daughter of Ayub Uddin, who was a retired police constable in East Pakistan.
5. Shonar Ma, 40-year-old housewife, and wife of Ayub Uddin.
6. Shajal Miah, 14-year-old farmer, and daughter of Sifat Ullah.
7. Porchan Bibi, 16-year-old a student, and daughter of Tamij Uddin.
8. Kamalar Ma, 65-year-old housewife who came from Nabiganj to attend the marriage ceremony.
9. Taiyab Jaan Bibi, a 65-year-old housewife.
10. Lal Bibi, 41-year-old housewife, and the wife of Late Alam Ullah.
11. Bashanti Rani Shukra Vaidya, a 42-year-old woman.

Manohar Miah of the village lost five relatives. Severely wounded, he still carries the scars of the injuries he received that fateful day.

The villagers of Halderpur could not understand why their peaceful community was attacked by the Pakistani Air Force. Some believe that because of the stick-fight the aircraft pilots thought that it was a training field of freedom fighters. The villagers also think that the Pakistanis must have later realized that they had conducted the raid without reason.

However, there was never any acknowledgement or apology for the slaughter that day.



The spot where Pakistani Air Force jets launched their attack in Halderpur.

A few months later, at a dinner in the air force mess in Dacca, a pilot told his fellow mates that after he carried out an aerial attack in Halderpur, he realized later that it was an unnecessary assault on innocent villagers. When asked by one of his colleagues, Captain Nadir Ali, whether he knew of the damage done to the people of Halderpur, he responded, ‘Only Bengalis were killed, so what—why do we have to care?’

Until today, no monument for the martyrs has been built in the village and no effort has been made to preserve their graves.

BIR BIKRAM U.K. CHING AND HIS RESCUE OPERATION AT KAUAHAT VILLAGE

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR,
SWADHINATA PADAK AWARDEE, BIR PROTIK

In the first week of May 1971, a Mukti Bahini company commander, Subedar Arab Ali of East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), operating in Lalmonirhat area, instructed Havildar U.K. Ching to conduct an operation against the Pakistani Army in Kauahat village, adjacent to a branch of the Dharla river. The Pakistani soldiers and their collaborators were regularly harassing and torturing the villagers in Kauahat.

After the briefing, Havildar U.K. Ching advanced with his platoon and reached the riverbank, when it was almost dark. With his binoculars, he saw a number of soldiers burning houses in the village. He instructed his men to stealthily cross the river by boat and lay an ambush along the track, leading out of the village. He predicted that the Pakistanis would retreat along this path. After burning and looting the soldiers were nonchalantly leaving the village with their booty. The ambush was successfully executed, and a number of soldiers were killed, while the rest fled from the area. Mukti Bahini was able to capture one Pakistani soldier alive. Immediately, U.K. Ching interrogated the soldier and obtained basic information on the

deployment of the army in the area. He blindfolded the soldier and ordered two Muktijoddhas to take him to the base camp, for further interrogation, by Subedar Arab Ali.



Bir Bikram U.K. Ching.

U.K. Ching, along with the Muktijoddhas entered the village and witnessed a horrific scene. He found most of the houses were burnt and there were charred remains of bodies everywhere. The Muktijoddhas were stunned at the level of violence and viciousness on the part the Pakistani soldiers. The Pakistani bloodhounds desire to kill Bengalis had been achieved. Most of the villagers who had fled, returned on seeing the Mukti Bahini. There was a hue and cry everywhere, as almost every family was affected by the brutality. Muktijoddhas, with the help of the villagers, arranged for the burial of the victims. The inhabitants told them that before the Pakistani Army arrived, they sent as many women and children as they could down the river in boats, so that they could be safe. However, the male population could not leave because no more boats were available. U.K. Ching assured the villagers that he would try to locate the women and children and send information back to them. Meanwhile, the villagers

decided that they would leave their homes and go to the refugee camps across the border, as they could not bear any more suffering.



Mukti Bahini fighters in a celebratory mood after the war.

Ching, sailed down the river in search of the women and children. When the boats reached a small island, he could hear children crying. The Muktijoddhas quickly disembarked and started searching the area, which was covered by tall grass and thick vegetation. They found 32 women and children hiding in the low land, amidst the undergrowth. They were terrified when they saw Ching and his team, as they were wearing khaki uniforms of the EPR which was similar to Pakistani Army outfit. Ching consoled and reassured the women and children by saying that they were Muktijoddhas and they had come to rescue and escort them to safety. After gaining their confidence, he arranged for the displaced souls to cross the river and reach a village nearby. The women informed him that they were from Kauahat village and that they were able to escape from before the Pakistani soldiers arrived. In that situation, Ching decided not to tell them about the carnage in the village. He took them to a primary school and requested the locals to

give them food and water, which was readily provided. After the women and children were settled, he told them that most of the inhabitants of Kauahat were killed, the village itself was destroyed, and the villagers, who managed to escape, were on the move to cross the border. He suggested that his team would escort them to the refugee camp in India and that he would inform the villagers about their location, so that they could make contact.

The scene was tragic, as all the women and children were wailing and crying on hearing that most of the male members of their families had been killed. After consoling them, Ching escorted them to a refugee camp across the border. He also sent two Muktijoddhas to Kauahat village to inform the villagers about the location of the refugee camp, where the 32 women and children were being escorted. On reaching the refugee camp, Ching requested the authorities to make arrangements, so that these poor people could get some relief and succor. He assisted in settling them down and told them that the remaining villagers had been informed about their location.

In 1971, Havildar U.K. Ching, who was a soldier of the East Pakistan Rifles, was posted to Hatibandha Border Outpost (BOP). On 26 March, after the genocide against the people of Bangladesh was launched, he along with the Bengali EPR soldiers answered the call of freedom, by revolting and joining the Liberation War. U.K. Ching was a Marma belonging to Bandarban. The spirit of compassion for human beings was evident in his attitude and conduct. He not only fought valiantly in a number of operations, but also offered a helping hand to the suffering in times of need. For his gallantry on the battlefield, he was awarded the Bir Bikram. He passed away on 25 July 2014.

PART – 2

The War on the Eastern Front

STORIES OF 18 RAJPUT

BRIGADIER BALRAJ KAPUR

A Special Mission

I had spent just three days with my unit, 18 Rajput and I found myself in the Forward Assembly Area, where the battalion was preparing to launch an attack. Lieutenant Colonel Ashok Verma, our Commanding Officer (CO), addressed the men before going to battle. He looked very impressive and spoke extremely well. He filled us with a lot of *josh* and inspiration.

In the afternoon, the OGp (the Commanding Officer's Group of subordinate commanders) was called for final co-ordination. The CO started briefing the 2iC (Second-in-command), Major G.S. Sidhu about a special mission. During that period, my thoughts were elsewhere. Suddenly, I heard the CO telling the 2iC, while pointing towards me, 'Take this youngster along; it will be a good learning experience for him.' As we broke off, the 2iC told me to get ready and report to him in one hour. I had no clue about what we were required to do and was scared to ask anyone, since I had been present at the briefing and should have known.

Later, I learnt that the 2iC, radio operator Jagdish and Bhagwan from the RP (Regimental Police) Section and I were to join 4 Guards, which was crossing the border ahead of our unit. The brigade was tasked with the job of surrounding Akhaura. After 4 Guards had reached its projected location,

we were to revert to the battalion, which would have fetched up by then. This would help in case a link-up between the two units became necessary.

After last light, 4 Guards set out. With us, was a commando platoon of 10 Bihar, led by Captain Sharma. They were to branch off and proceed on a separate mission. As we entered East Pakistan, enemy artillery shelling started. It was not very accurate, but for a first timer like me, it was scary. Sometime later, we came under small arms fire, so we immediately hit ground and dug our foxholes. The earth was soft and digging was not a problem, as each of us was carrying a mini shovel. The leading company tackled the enemy and we resumed our advance an hour later.

As soon as 4 Guards reached its location, the four of us proceeded towards the site where 18 Rajput were to reach subsequently. It was around 2 a.m. After some distance, we suddenly came under intense small arms fire. We took cover in the folds in the ground, but we were vulnerable and in the open.

The enemy position was approximately 200 metres away. We heard them shout, 'Niklo kafiro', accompanied by Punjabi expletives. It was probably a platoon-strength post. Towards one side, there was a small hamlet about 100 metres away, on raised ground. Taking advantage of the darkness, we sprinted amidst a hail of bullets. We managed to reach the abandoned hamlet (8 to 10 houses). It offered us better safety and cover.

While we waited, the Pakistanis were kept screaming and yelling at us. We decided that we would shoot ourselves dead, rather than be captured alive, if they came for us. My lifetime whizzed past me. I remembered my near and dear ones, as we awaited certain death. It was extremely frightening. I could see the fear on other faces as well.

Around 4 a.m., we found some soldiers advancing towards our hamlet under enemy fire. We were relieved to see that they were from the 10 Bihar Commando Platoon. They were about 12 men, Captain Sharma and some others had been killed, and their mission had been a failure. Some of these soldiers were wounded as well. We all took up positions around the hamlet.

At first light, in the far distance, we could see the 18 Rajputs marching in. It was a huge column of troops about 500 to 600 metres away. The

Pakistanis panicked and started abandoning their positions and ran in various directions, on either side of our hamlet. Seven of them made the mistake of attempting to wade through a waist-deep pond, 500 metres wide and close to the side where I was located.

A jawan of 10 Bihar, who was wounded in the head and bleeding profusely, started firing at them and abusing them. His fire was most inaccurate – probably due to his weakened physical and mental state. I asked him to move aside and took up position behind the LMG. I began firing single shots. Seeing the direction of the bullets, I adjusted my aim. The Pakistanis raised their hands and plead for mercy. However, I had no mercy in mind for them. In the next three to four minutes I emptied two magazines into them and all seven sank into their watery graves.

It was a great relief for us to rejoin the 18 Rajputs as they came marching in some time later. The relief though was short-lived, as we came under air attack, which was quite a nasty experience.

Capture of the Bridge on the River Titas

In the battle of Akhaura, C Company of our battalion had captured their objective and exploited up to the railway station. B Company was to pass through them to capture a railway bridge, over the Titas river, before the enemy could blow it up. We met Major Jimmy and Captain Aveen of C Company; they showed us our objective, which was about a kilometre away. The time was around 7 a.m., and we had to rush to capture the bridge intact.

C Company moved along the railway line, which was about 10 to 15 feet high in relation to the land around. All these low-lying areas were filled with rainwater, which had gathered and formed ponds after the monsoon. Guided by the Mukti Bahini, we waded through these chest and waist-deep waters.

The bridge was heavily guarded by the enemy. B Company launched its attack in a single file, along the railway line. Enemy bunkers and trenches were facing the open fields and our direction, and they did not expect an

attack along the railway track. They were unable to engage us. The leading troops, with Lance Havildar Girdhari at the head, assaulted the bridge position with our war cry, 'Bajrang bali ki jai!' The enemy, who had been softened by our artillery and air attacks for the past couple of days, started fleeing across the bridge.

We captured our side of the bridge and my platoon was tasked to secure the far bank. We were rushing across the bridge, when one brave, heavily-built Pakistani NCO and a soldier took up position about 200 meters away on the railway line itself and began firing with an LMG. Our advance was halted, as we began suffering casualties.

To evict them, I crept up ahead alone, along the base of the raised railway embankment, undetected. I crawled until I was close to the two Pakistani soldiers and was just 7 to 8 feet below and next to them. I could hear them talk. I was carrying two primed hand grenades, tucked inside my shirt. I took out one of them, removed the safety pin with my teeth, and gently lobbed it where they were positioned. I heard the spring action, but it did not explode (maybe because it had got wet, while we waded through water).

Now I was scared that these two would come for me. Fortunately, they were more scared than I was. When they saw the grenade, they probably thought we had closed in and another one could be coming shortly, which could be fatal. They got on their feet and ran for their lives.

This was how the bridge was finally captured. It was fully prepared to be blown up and our Pioneer Section disconnected the charges.

Death Comes only When Destined

I believe that death comes only when destined and this was substantiated by several instances during the war. A bullet hit Sepoy Vijay Pal's shoulder in Akhaura—a couple of inches lower and it would have been fatal. An Artillery OP, when under fire took shelter behind a pole and two bullets grazed past his head, leaving permanent scars above his ears and Sepoy Ravinder survived a full-on back blast from his own RCL gun.

It also happened to me on three occasions. Once, when I was on a special mission with our battalion 2iC described earlier. Next at Ashuganj, where brave men, who were standing just behind me or who fought with me, attained martyrdom, while I survived. The third occasion was soon after the capture of the railway bridge over Titas river in Akhaura.

We often came under severe artillery fire. When one gets used to shelling, it is not difficult to calculate the flight time of the shell. When the rounds take off from the gun position, their bang can be heard, then after about thirty seconds take cover and pray that you don't get a direct hit or wounded by a splinter. We also came under a different type of fire, where the explosion at our end occurred first and then we heard the bang at the gun position. We later realised these were coming from direct firing RCL guns, using high explosive ammunition. They came with greater intensity and had a significant shock effect.

We avoided the use of captured Pakistani bunkers because they were likely to be booby-trapped. During one such RCL salvo, I felt something hot on my waist. Then, I could feel the trickle of blood going down. A splinter had hit me. Sepoy Naim Singh, a battalion wrestler, who was with me opened up my web equipment, gave me a few sips of water and tied a bandage. However, the bleeding did not stop. We remained like that for a few minutes until the shelling ceased.

News spread about my injury. The CO fetched up at the bridge to congratulate and encourage us. He said I should go back to the RAP (Regimental Aid Post), which was about a kilometre away, near Akhaura Railway Station. Our company stretcher-bearers had come up, but I insisted on walking, as I was able to do so.

I started walking back along the railway line on the high embankment. Being a lonely figure in an exposed position – thus a lucrative target – a Pakistani MMG opened up on me.

The bullets were whizzing all around me. I had the choice of going down on the reverse slope of the embankment to escape the gun fire but that would have been cumbersome, as I was bleeding and in pain. I decided to remain on line regardless. The enemy fired at least one full belt of 250

rounds, but was not able to hit me even once, such was my destiny. He gave up.

I reached the aid post where our regimental medical officer, Captain Narula stitched me up, and gave me some painkillers. He offered further evacuation, but I declined. The splinter remained inside me, until it was removed in a military hospital a few months later.

The Akhaura Tigers: Uncommon Valour, their Common Virtue

Our batch had passed out from the Indian Military Academy on 14 November 1971, a month in advance. We were given a few days joining time and rushed to our units. It appeared as though the Indian Army was waiting for these 500-odd officers to join up, before they commenced operations.

I reached 18 Rajput, after a four-day journey by train and road. The battalion was at the Tripura/East Pakistan border in a sort of assembly area. Foxholes and bivouacs were the order of the day, as Pakistani artillery shelling was a regular feature. A grim looking senior JCO welcomed me and handed me a sten gun, bayonet, pouch ammunition loaded in magazines, helmet, two primed hand grenades and a small shovel. Two nights later, we walked to our Forward Assembly Area and were ready to launch an attack.

After a well-planned set-piece battle, our brigade captured Akhaura on 5 December 1971. The enemy was evicted, and on the run with us in hot pursuit. They blew up bridges over rivers and rivulets. We chased them regardless of the fact that our ammunition was running low and our artillery support and supply lines was getting out of range. On 9 December, around 5.30 a.m., we reached Ashuganj on the mighty Meghna river, whose far bank was not visible—it was so wide! The Pakistani Army, with its back to the wall and unable to cross the huge river decided to wage a pitched battle in a desperate do-or-die situation.

To evict the enemy, B and D Companies got into assault formation. I was in B Company, which was commanded by Major Yudhvir Singh

Sisodia. True to his name, he was one of the bravest men I have ever seen. Setting aside popular wisdom, he insisted on being the leading man as the company marched. This had a positive impact on the men, as they followed him without hesitation.

We were attacking under fierce enemy artillery and small arms fire and taking heavy casualties. A hail of bullets to his chest felled Sepoy Jung Bahadur, a young soldier, who was carrying my radio set. He died instantly. I picked up the set and advanced. Major Sisodia too was hit in his leg and was unable to move forward. We received the news that Major Pritam, Commanding Officer of D Company was similarly wounded and incapacitated.

To our relief we found a bund, which is a sort of raised ground (approximately two and a half feet high) ahead of us. Our company took up positions there and tried to return fire. As we raised our heads above the bund, the enemy shot at us. Our artillery and 3-inch mortars were unable to support us. Around 7:30 a.m., air force fighter aircraft arrived, but since a bullet had destroyed our Forward Air Controller (FAC) Flight Lieutenant Dhillon's radio handset, he could not contact them.

Meanwhile, Major T.L. Sharma, Officer Commanding A Company was sent forward to take charge of the battle, as the two company commanders were wounded. Another brave man, Major Sharma rallied round us, encouraging the men to hold their ground and fight. In doing so, he was exposing himself to enemy fire. I felt hugely relieved and emboldened by his presence and I am sure the entire company felt the same. As he was standing behind me, I heard a sound as if he had been hit on his head by a hockey stick. I looked back and saw him fall, having been hit by bullets on his forehead. His helmet fell off and he managed one last deep breath, before he died. His head was a ghastly sight as grey matter and blood oozed out.

My Platoon Havildar Ram Das Singh then bandaged Major Sharma's head, as I held it in my lap. A thought struck me that I should take something to give it to his loved ones as a token of remembrance. My eyes fell on his wristwatch – I still remember it was a plain one, with a small dial

and steel strap. Then, I changed my mind, as I felt that the soldiers watching me may not understand my intentions.

We had to withdraw from the location. I saw Major Pritam on a stretcher. He was sitting upright and telling his troops to leave him and head for safety. He was a charismatic leader who was loved by his men. He would rather be in a position to save someone else than be saved by others.

Major Sisodia protested, but was carried out of the danger zone by Havildar Balbir – a middle-aged, paunchy, superseded NCO, who could never have passed the fireman's lift test. Yet, he rose to the occasion and saved his company commander.

Such were the Akhaura Tigers.

The Dog Pose

As we were pursuing the Pakistanis after the battle of Akhaura, our food supply (B echelon) was not always able to catch up with us due to the obstacles created by the enemy. However, the locals, who were fed up of the atrocities by the Pakistanis found a saviour in the Indian Army, and came forward and provided food and fruits for us on several occasions.

Once when B Company was marching through a small town, a halwai offered us his huge karahi of gulab jamuns for us to eat. Major Sisodia was the leading man and I was bringing up the rear, he declined, but looked away tacitly to allow others to make use of the good offer. As the jawans passed by they picked up one or two gulab jamuns. By the time my turn came, I saw the last piece disappear. Now only the syrup was left, but how was one to drink it from the karahi? The company was marching at a brisk pace, there was no time to think, and yet it was so inviting! I dipped my mouth in the vessel and drank like a dog. Though I messed up my face, the sweetened syrup was most refreshing!

Cars in Dhaka

While India had its Ambassador and Fiat cars, Bangladesh boasted of cars from Japan, America and Germany. The streets of Dhaka were full of

colourful cyclo-rickshaws and swanky cars. The West Pakistani government officials and business people had abandoned their property and vehicles and fled for fear of their lives from of the Mukti Bahini.

On reaching Dhaka, I was pleasantly surprised to see our Intelligence Officer, Second Lieutenant B.S. Gill, smartly driving a red Toyota. The battalion had taken over some such vehicles until the time alternate arrangements could be made. Later, we took over Pakistani Army vehicles with their drivers. One Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) pick-up van was detailed for our administrative duties.

Some wealthy Pakistanis like Adamjee and Isphani had their mansions located there. I was told that Adamjee had hosted a dinner at this house for Queen Elizabeth. Their driveway was about 200 metres long either way and I learnt driving on the PIA van here. One morning, the van was inordinately delayed, as it was to bring the men's breakfast. As I waited, an ordnance havildar came and halted close by as the car he was driving had stalled. Thereafter, he tried several times, but it did not start. He left it and walked away.

After waiting in vain for some more time, I went to the car and to my astonishment, it started on my first attempt. The gear lever was on the steering and I put it into gear and it began moving forward. This was my first drive on the main road, which was not so crowded in the morning. Also, the crossings did not have traffic lights, as there were traffic islands, which made my driving easier.

I drove in the same gear all through and reached our mess, without any incident. I parked the car, went inside – had a bath and breakfast. When I returned, the car had vanished. Someone else had taken it away!

LIBERATION OF BANGLADESH

COLONEL KULDEV NAND

Midway through the war, the straight forward direction given to all formations in the East was to reach Dhaka, at the earliest. Keeping that in mind, the basic tactics to be followed were: Contact, clear, contain or bypass and race to Dhaka. We were part of 4 Corps/23 Mountain Division/23 Mountain Artillery Brigade. Our unit, 197 Mountain Regiment, was in direct support of 301 Mountain Brigade. Once the plans had been finalized, the formations and units were asked to move to the concentration area in April/May 1971. The 23 Mountain Division was concentrated along the Eastern border, from Comilla in the north to Chittagong in the south. The concentration area for 301 Mountain Brigade was in the general area Udepur.

Our unit was divided into a road and rail column. All major equipment was moved by train and the rest was transported by road, the staging area being Dharmanagar, close to Agartala. I was part of the road column and functioned as second-in-command. Routes followed for induction were as follows:

- (a) *Road Column:* Hatigarh – Changsari – Shillong – Jawai – Karimganj – Dharmanagar – staging area – Concentration area Udepur.
- (b) *Rail Column:* Tangla – Karimganj – Dharmanagar – staging area.

The unit was reorganized at the staging area. In the absence of a rail link beyond Dharmanagar, the unit had to travel by road to its concentration area. Since the rivers from Dharmanagar to Udepur didn't have bridges, all the vehicles had to be ferried across the rivers. The unit eventually reached its destination in three days.

The 301 Mountain Brigade was deployed astride the Gomti river as follows:

- (a) 1/11 GR – north of the river.
- (b) 14 JAT – South of the river.
- (c) 4 Kumaon – in the area of KK Nagar.

BC/OP Parties married up with their respective battalions and guns were deployed suitably to support the task of the affiliated battalions. We remained deployed in the border area for a very long time. OPs were deployed, at the Border Outposts (BOPs), along with infantry companies. Since we had 76 mm guns, which had a limited range, subunits had to be deployed independently. I was OP Officer with 14 JAT, deployed at BOP, South of Gomti river with D Company and thereafter with B Company. Before the commencement of the war, I had been Forward Observation Officer with a number of patrols. We used to start at night and return before sunrise.

It was on 3 December 1971 that we received orders to cross the border at around 1700 hours. Romeo Battery was in direct support of 1/11 Gorkha Rifles. The team of officers with the battery included:

- (a) Major Vinay Shankar, Battery Commander.
- (b) Captain A.N. Sharma, Observation Post Officer.
- (c) Captain Kuldev Nand, Observation Post Officer.
- (d) Lieutenant S.P. Singh, Gun Position Officer.

The 1/11 Gorkha Rifles was inducted from KK Nagar to head for Comilla – Chittagong. We hit the road on the morning of 4 December. C Company was ordered to move along the road to Mudafarganj, where we reached at around 0900 hours. Suddenly, a very heavy volume of small

arms fire came onto the leading column. Major Narpat Singh Shekhawat led the company with his radio operator followed by me, with radio operator Attar Singh, operator Ram Niwas and my technical assistant, Ashok Bangale. The company followed us on the left of the road. As luck would have it, the bullets were at a much higher level than the ground and hence was ineffective. The company commander asked me to bring down artillery fire on the enemy, who were not very far away. We had only a troop of 5.5 inch medium guns in support (24 Medium Regiment), I explained the situation to Major Vinay Shankar, with regard to the safety of our own troops. Regardless, I passed the fire orders to the guns, gave a correction of 'add 400' and fire by observation (FBO) was imposed. Before I could commence firing, Major Narpat, with a section to the left, and one section to the right, with fire support from light machine guns was on the enemy in about 30 minutes. The bridge was captured intact and casualties were:

- (a) *Own*: Company commander's operator was hit on the arm.
- (b) *Enemy*: Eight killed, two captured (Razakars), one armourer havildar from the Electrical and Mechanical Engineers was wounded and picked up during mopping up operations. This individual was evacuated in GOC 23 Mountain Division helicopter.

Action was completed by 1300 hours on the same day, i.e. 4 December 1971. The battalion fetched up and took over the area of Mudafarganj and C Company was asked to move to Haziganj along with a squadron of PT-76 tanks, headed by Squadron Commander Major Inderjit Singh. The move was carried out the whole night. The next day, we reached somewhere between Mudafarganj and Haziganj. There was some resistance along the road, B Company was ordered to clear the opposition. I was asked to join up with them for the assault. We reached the FUP. I had one troop of 120 mm mortars in support. The shelling of the area was carried out and this was the first time I witnessed the effectiveness of the weapon. After the bombardment, when the company assaulted, they found two dead and the rest of the enemy had evacuated the position. B Company charged the area and returned with the dry rations that belonged to the enemy.

This action took place on 5 December in the daytime. I went back to C Company and the same day, we were asked to resume the advance to Haziganj. Brushing aside minor opposition, we reached in the evening of 6 December. C Company was tasked with providing protection to Headquarters 301 Mountain Brigade, which had occupied the area of the Microwave Station. Battalion Headquarters with other elements occupied a school building at Haziganj, where we halted for the night.

At around 8 p.m., enemy shelling began on the Microwave Station area and simultaneously, the enemy placed a light machine gun at the gate of the school and did some damage in terms of casualties. C Company was asked to throw out the enemy, on our retaliation, the mortar firing stopped and we headed towards the school, which was about 500 yards away. C Company fired at the enemy in the school area, at the same time some young officers went up to the roof of the school and started shooting from there. The enemy fled soon after.

The next morning, the journey was resumed to reach Chandpur. A number of minor actions took place along the way. The battalion crossed a river on the back of PT-76 tanks, since the fleeing enemy had destroyed the bridge. The floating power of the tanks became a great asset. We reached Chandpur on the night of 7/8 December.

Approximately 10,000 Pakistani troops had surrendered to the Indian Army at Chandpur. They were all confined in the military hospital there. C Company occupied the area surrounding the hospital. The following morning a Pakistani ship, which was sailing away to Dhaka was asked to return ashore. Captain A.N. Sharma must have covered this action, since he was the Forward Observation Officer (FOO) with D Company. The entire crew of the vessel was captured and brought to Battalion Headquarters.

The following morning the battalion was moved back to Comilla by transport, via Lalmai Hills. We reached Daudkhandi, and on the same day, helicopters lifted the battalion including heavy guns across the Meghna river. The people of Daudkhandi greeted us with sweets. After reorganizing ourselves, it took time to gather the guns, since the helicopters had dropped them wherever they could find dry patches. A number of minor actions took

place between Daudkhandi and Narayanganj. We reached the Lakhiya river (home side) on the night of 14-15 December. The enemy still occupied the area across the river. I was asked to silence a medium machine gun, which was effectively firing on our troops of A Company. I took a precision shot and destroyed the gun. The 76 mm guns did the job.

We had to face plenty of shelling by enemy mortars in that area. Captain Patnayak (A Company, Officiating Company Commander) still remembers me for saving him from a mortar shell by pulling him into a trench, in the nick of time. The battalion was reorganized on the western bank of the Lakhiya river. A suitable area to cross the river was found and the crossing operation took place. C Company was asked to lead, so Major Narpat Singh Shekhawat occupied the first boat. My technical assistant, a radio operator, and I were the FOO with him. The enemy was firing at us from across the river and we were provided full fire support from our guns and small arms. When we were in the middle of the river, a message came on the radio that a cease fire had been declared, since the Pakistani troops had surrendered to the Indian Army. The firing was stopped. We crossed the river and got into Narayanganj. The battalion was asked to capture and occupy Adamji Mills.

We reached the gate of the mills, and were met by enemy firing. The enemy had holed up here and refused to give up. I was asked to rain artillery fire on them. I passed the fire orders to the guns of Romeo Battery. The first ranging round landed in the area inside Adamji Mills. We soon saw several white flags raised and enemy troops moving towards the gate. The firing was halted, gates were opened, and we moved into the mill area. I was keen to see the site of the medium machine gun, which was firing on us so lethally. We found some pieces of flesh and plenty of blood in that area. It was the house of one of the site managers of the mills. We were asked to concentrate on the school building in Narayanganj. The unit regrouped there and we had a victory barakhana that night.

On 17 December 1971, Major Vinay Shankar (our battery commander) asked Captain A.N. Sharma and me to accompany him to visit 1/11 Gorkha Rifles at Adamji Mills. After one or two days, we deinducted and came back to Udepur.

THE BATTLE OF HILLI

BRIGADIER PRAKASH TULARAM GHOGALE, VSM

During the period leading up to the Indo-Pak War of 1971, the 8 Battalion Brigade of the Guards, part of 202 Mountain Brigade and 20 Mountain Division was tasked to establish a training camp for the Mukti Bahini in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. On completion of this task, in April 1971, we held the Pachagarh Salient, 100 kilometres, inside East Pakistan, at Bhajanpur, on the Karatoya river.

The Battle of Hilli is the most famous and savagely fought battle of the Indo-Pak conflict, in the Eastern Sector. The Army Commander Eastern Command, Lieutenant General J.S. Aurora, PVSM, later said, ‘This was the bloodiest battle in the then East Pakistan.’

The First Battle of Hilli took place from 22 to 24 November, while the Second Battle was fought from 10 December to 11 December. The First Battle was fiercer by far, since it was fought before the war was declared on 3 December 1971, at a time when the morale of the Pakistani forces was sky high.

In mid-November 1971, Lieutenant General Aurora, in an exclusive address to our battalion, said that there was every likelihood of an all-out war with Pakistan and that we were on the threshold of history. He had specially chosen us to lead the Indian campaign into East Pakistan, also

adding that the result of the assault would have a significant bearing on future operations.



Map showing the impregnable Morapara defences.

Major General Lachhman Singh Lehl, Vir Chakra, a hero of the 1947 Indo-Pak War, commanded 20 Mountain Division. The 202 Mountain Brigade, part of 20 Mountain Division was assigned the task of capturing Hilli, a strategic border town in East Pakistan. The commander of 202 Mountain Brigade was Brigadier Farhad Bhatti, VSM, the erstwhile commanding officer of 4 Grenadiers of Assal Uttar fame. The 8 Guards was tasked to capture Morapara, which was part of North Hilli, with 5 Garhwal Rifles, as reserve. The other unit in the brigade was 22 Maratha Light Infantry. For the attack on Morapara, a medium regiment less a battery, two field regiments, a light battery, and a squadron of T-55 tanks were in

support. Lieutenant Colonel Shamsheer Singh was the commanding officer of 8 Guards and Major S.K. Chaudhuri, the second in-command.

Hilli straddled a part of India and Pakistan, with the Pakistani railway line running north-south. Our brigade was located in Trimohini near Hilli, and our units carried out extensive training and reconnaissance of the Pakistani defences. Brigadier Tajammul Hussain Malik led the enemy 205 Brigade, in the Hilli complex. According to Pakistani columnist, Colonel Niazi Ti, 'The fortifications here were a classic example of defence in the history of modern warfare.'

Morapara was the stronghold of the Pakistani defences in Hilli. Solid bunkers had been constructed using railway tracks and sleepers, and were sited for all round defence. Waterlogged and overgrown paddy fields surrounded the area and fortifications were strengthened by mines, booby traps, and barbed wire. Large numbers of machine guns were deployed, some on top of houses and trees and the ponds and marshes were ingeniously incorporated into this impregnable fortress. The defences were manned by the famous 'Bawanjas' 4 Frontier Force, the erstwhile pre-Partition regiment of our Army Chief, General Sam Manekshaw, M.C. The enemy was very well entrenched; they knew that we were coming and patiently waited for us.

The enemy defended area was well integrated. The map of the Morapara defences shows the network of solid fortifications. Every inch of ground had been fortified and houses were converted into shellproof pillboxes. It was going to be a battle of attrition between the Guards and the Bawanjas.



Lt Col Shamsher Singh, Commanding Officer 8 Guards being briefed about the Morapara defences by Maj Hemant Manjrekar.

D-Day, after being postponed umpteen times finally arrived. It was the fateful night of 22-23 November 1971, when the Guards moved in for the assault. Prior to the midnight attack, 38 Medium Regiment, 100 Mountain Regiment and 37 Mountain Regiment had begun their bombardment from the afternoon itself. It felt like an earthquake. Yet, later it was found that only an odd bunker or two at the objective had collapsed due to artillery fire. We moved in from the north and B Company secured Ghasuria, as the firm base. C Company under Major P.P. Singh captured Naopara, north of Morapara, without much resistance.

At around 1 a.m., under the cover of artillery bombardment, the assault led by A and B Companies commenced. Murderous machine gun fire was spewing from well-entrenched defences, as the troops approached the objective. The right assault A Company Commander, Major Hemant Manjrekar, led from the front exhorting his men to follow him. He was at the head of his company having negotiated mines, wire obstacles and booby traps in waist deep water. Hit by a machine gun burst, he continued forward

and lobbed a grenade in the enemy bunker destroying it, before another burst got him in the head. If A Company covered itself with glory, the man responsible was Manjrekar. He was found at the objective facing Morapara, with one arm raised towards the heavens, bearing testimony to the valour of this prince among soldiers. Regretfully, although recommended for the highest gallantry medal, he received no award. Motivation levels of A Company can be gauged from the fact that all its three officers were killed at the objective. Seeing Manjrekar attain martyrdom, his brave operator, Lance Naik Srilal joined Second Lieutenant Shamsheer Singh Samra, commanding the left assault platoon. Samra was at the enemy defences, when he came under machine gun fire and was hit in the chest. Unmindful of his wound, he charged the bunker lobbing a grenade and destroying the gun.

He had earlier confided to me, 'My ambition in this war is to pull out an MMG from a Paki bunker!'

True to form, he neared another enemy bunker and was about to pull out the gun, when he was hit again. He tried to remove the pin from his grenade to lob it into the bunker, when he was mortally wounded. The brave lieutenant was found at the bunker that he successfully neutralized, with a sten gun in one hand and a grenade in the other. His dream to pull out a machine gun remained unfulfilled, but in the eyes of his comrades he remains immortal. Samra deservedly won a posthumous Maha Vir Chakra. A number of individuals from A Company were mortally wounded, among them were Havildars Kailashnath Tewari and Manbhal Upadhyay, who were wounded, but continued to fight hand-to-hand with determination and later succumbed to their injuries. It was evident that this company had borne the brunt of enemy fire.

B Company was the right assault company which lost its Company Commander, Major R. Nath, who was wounded by shrapnel, before reaching the objective and had to be evacuated. Captain S.K. Bansal took over the company and along with Subedar Raj Bahadur Singh and Naib Subedar Mohammed Nayeem led the assault with immense courage and fortitude. Bahadur despite being hit by a fragmentation mine, continued the

assault and silenced a heavy machine gun. He carried on leading his men, but eventually succumbed to his injuries. Despite being wounded, Nayeem exhorted his men and was ultimately killed. However, along with Bansal, they had cleared a part of the objective and managed to gain a tenuous hold. Raj Bahadur Singh was decorated with a posthumous Vir Chakra; Bansal was awarded a Mention in Dispatches, while the courageous Nayeem did not get any award, despite being recommended. Junior leadership was at its very best, as leaders fell, others sprang up, took their place and joined in the fierce combat.

Assessment of the situation in the fog of battle is indeed tricky. ‘Cometh the Hour, cometh the Man!’ It was now the youngest officer of A Company, Second Lieutenant Parmanand Gupta’s turn to rise to the occasion. Srilal, the radio operator, spoke to the commanding officer, who ordered him to get hold of Gupta, collect the remnants of the troops and to assault. With B Company pinned down, after being briefed by Srilal, Lieutenant Gupta, with maturity and sangfroid beyond his years, reorganized elements of his company and in concert with Subedar Dallu Prasad launched an audacious attack. He cleared two bunkers before he was cut down. It was a tragic end to the indomitable courage shown by this youngster, whose bullet-ridden body was found leaning against a tree. The bravery displayed by him was amazing. He too went unsung and unrecognized, despite being recommended. Srilal, moving from trench to trench came across individuals speaking in Urdu. He immediately fired a burst killing three Pakistanis. Another brave soldier, who redeemed himself with his audacity was Naik Ram Din Singh, who also made the supreme sacrifice.

Since Morapara had not been fully cleared, D Company, under the unassuming Major K.K. Rao was launched. Rao, although wounded initially, continued to lead his brave men. As he destroyed a bunker, he was struck by a machine gun burst. The courageous officer refused to be evacuated and succumbed to his injuries, while urging his men forward. He was awarded the Sena Medal posthumously for his gallantry. Captain Vishnu Sharma took over the reins of the company and put up a dogged

fight throughout the night, holding on to his segment of the objective that had been captured. He was awarded a Vir Chakra.

Lance Naik Ram Ugrah Pandey of D Company fought one of the most spirited actions and destroyed three machine gun bunkers with grenades and a rocket launcher respectively, before he was mortally wounded. He was the second posthumous winner of the Maha Vir Chakra. There were others from D company, who emulated his example, notably Lance Naik Mahadeo Singh and Company Havildar Major Harpal Singh. The hand-to-hand combat continued throughout the night of 22-23 November.

At dawn, the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Bhatta decided to attack Basudeopur border outpost, adjacent to Morapara, with a company of the 5 Garhwal Rifles. The brave Garhwalis fought with grit duly capturing the objective, after suffering heavy casualties.

At mid-day on 23 November, the situation was uncertain with D Company running out of ammunition and the enemy carrying out intense shelling. The heavy T-55 tanks were bogged down in the paddy fields and were thus not able to provide critical support. Although, there was a partial hold on Morapara, the remnants had to withdraw under intense fire and shelling and along with the rest of the battalion organized itself at Naopara before engaging the enemy.

Throughout the day on 23 November, a stalemate continued, characteristic of an infantry battle, involving highly motivated, die-hard and determined combatants. The situation could have gone either way. The night of 23-24 November, all three units carried out probing action on enemy positions, with vigorous patrolling and raids. All attempts to breakthrough from the north and west failed. However, by first light on 24 November, Second Lieutenant K.S.R. Jain's column of C Company, secured a foothold on the east of Morapara and Lieutenant Colonel Shamsheer sent the remnants of C Company and Battalion Headquarters, to hold on to the area that had been captured.

We repulsed the enemy counter-attack, supported by artillery and tank fire of the newly-inducted light PT-76 tanks of 69 Armoured Regiment. Morapara finally fell at 1000 hours, on 24 November, but the casualties

strewn in and around the objective told its own story and reflected the intensity of the bitter battle. A glorious chapter had been written in the history of this valiant battalion.

To quote the pre-eminent poet John Donne, '*Death be not proud!*'

* * *

A word about the sixteen-odd days that we spent holding the Morapara defences after its capture. The Guards held Morapara until 10 December, with the enemy pounding us with machine gun, artillery, mortar, and recoilless gunfire, along with frequent skirmishes. We continued holding our ground, even though there was an offer from the Division to relieve us. This decision of the commanding officer enabled the capture of the entire Hilli Complex and facilitated the unit's further march towards Rangpur and Dinajpur. The mortar platoon, under Subedar Barsati Ram, the recoilless guns, under Subedar Haribux Singh and Havildar Ranjit Singh, the machine gun platoon, under Havildar Awdhesh Bahadur played stellar roles; the latter being awarded Mention in Dispatches. Havildar Ram Bahadur and his Pioneers cleared minefields and booby traps at night, courageously assisting us in our patrolling and recovery of our martyred personnel.

The Second Battle of Hilli commenced on the night 10-11 December, and was fought by 202 Mountain Brigade with the Guards participating in most of the actions, along with the brave Garhwalis and the intrepid Marathas. However, actions post 10 December were not as brutal and fierce, since the morale of the enemy was on the wane. We also captured Captain Kamran, the Pakistani Observation Post Officer, thanks to Subedar Sheopal Singh.



Officers and men of 8 Guards after the capture of Morapara Defences. From L to R: Capt P.T. Ghogale (the author-without helmet), Lt Col Shamsheer Singh, Maj P.P. Singh and Second Lieutenant K.S. Roy Jain.

The Guards roll of honour in the two Hilli battles, included 70 killed, including four officers, and two JCOs, including one other rank, each from 38 Medium Regiment and 235 Engineer Regiment. In all, 130 were wounded, including six artillery officers, four JCOs, of which two were from artillery and one other rank from 235 Engineer Regiment. The Battle of Morapara itself accounted for about 50 killed and almost a hundred wounded. The savagery of the assault and the intensity of the battle was writ large on the faces of the martyred, indicating their will to capture the objective at any cost. I watched with awe as Major Chaudhari burnt the midnight oil in the confines of our bunker in Morapara, penning 91 citations.

As per their records, Pakistanis thought that three battalions had attacked them on the night of 22-23 November, first at 0100 hours, second at 0130 hours and the third on 23 November at 0630 hours. In reality, the first assault was led by A and B Companies, the second by D Company and the third at dawn of 23 November, was on Basudeopur border outpost, by a company of the Garhwalis. Imagine the ferocity of the attack, if the enemy

felt the way they did! Kamran, the captured Pakistani officer, also confirmed that they thought two battalions had attacked on the midnight of 22-23 November.

While visiting the military hospital, General Lehl was instructed by a wounded Guardsman, 'Do check how the Guardsmen were lying dead at Morapara. All would be facing the enemy.' Lehl in his book, *Indian Sword Strikes in East Pakistan* says, 'How right he was! No wonder 8 Guards fought so well.'

In war, it is leadership, which makes the difference between success and failure. Our proven dictum is that officers lead from the front. There is no doubt about that. However, spare a thought for the valiant men, who followed their officers into the valley of death, so to say. What went through the minds of that band of heroic soldiers when their commanders said, 'Follow Me.' What was their motivation? Why were they so inspired? What made them put aside their family attachments and bravely march into the jaws of death? Was it similar to what we youngsters boasted before the war about our need to teach the Pakistanis a lesson? The aftermath of a battle can be so debilitating, especially after losing near and dear comrades.

At Morapara, there were some tense moments, as we crossed the FUP and large number of enemy machine guns deployed on the flanks opened up. It was then that the Manjrekars, Samras, Guptas, and Raj Bahadurs achieved sublimity. They, in the highest tradition of the Indian Army, stood their ground in the hail of murderous fire. Reason enough for them to follow in their leaders' footsteps. A feeling of melancholy gets the better of me as the martyrs faces appear fleetingly before me; quite a few were my commando platoon colleagues.

This battle speaks volumes of the tenacity and fortitude of our men that despite heavy odds and fighting a protracted battle over 42 hours, the unit emerged victorious. We suffered overwhelming casualties, which possibly could have been reduced had the PT-76 tanks fetched up earlier. As a later day Armoured Brigade Commander, I am aware of the limitations of T-55s in riverine terrain. We received many awards, but there were countless

others who fought valiantly, unsung and unheralded, being deprived of much-deserved recognition.

It may not be widely known that the Pakistani officer holding Hilli, Akram Shahid was posthumously awarded the Nishan-e-Haider, the highest gallantry award in the Pakistani Army. Even General Manekshaw wrote a letter to the Pakistani Army Chief appreciating the fight put up by his old regiment in Hilli. The Sitar-e-Jurat was given to Second Lieutenant Mohammed Salim Khan and Brigade Commander Malik received the Hilal-e-Jurat, the only captured Pakistani Brigadier, who was later promoted. As per Pakistani records, their casualties in the entire Battle of Hilli were one officer, six JCOs and hundred other ranks. When compared to our unit casualties of four officers, two JCOs and sixtyfour other ranks, it brings out the stark difference in the style of officer leadership in the opposing armies and reminds me of the daring of Israeli officers in the Arab-Israel war of 1967.

The Guards, not counting supporting units, were awarded three MVCs including one to the commanding officer, two Vir Chakras, one Sena Medal, three mention in dispatches, Theatre Honour East Pakistan and Battle Honour Hilli. The Army Headquarters selected the Guards as one of the only three units to participate in the Republic Day victory parade on 26 January 1972.

The Battle of Morapara or the First Battle of Hilli may well be considered a classic example of sheer guts, sacrifice, and determination to win against all odds, by a fearless band of soldiers of a highly motivated unit. It was a hard slogging match between the Guards and the 'Piffers'. The Indian Army had got the better of the enemy's 'best' for time immemorial. This battle was for years staged at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, primarily to motivate the gentlemen cadets.

The souls of the martyrs' will rest in peace in the knowledge that their deeds have indeed been showcased for posterity and to serve as an inspiration to future generations of soldiers.

*For the foot soldiers, there's a Thin Red Line Which divides the sane from
the mad?*

– Rudyard Kipling

AMBUSH AT MILE STONE 10, DECEMBER 1971

COLONEL A. KRISHNASWAMI, VRC, VSM

A God sent Opportunity – Visit to Dhaka – December 2012

On 15 December 2012, the Prime Minister Sheik Hasina was interacting with the delegates of the visiting Indian Army war veterans. She asked me, ‘When did you last visit Dhaka?’

I gave her a witty reply. I said, ‘Madam, I entered Dhaka on 15 December 1971, forty-one years ago, with my soldiers and with weapons in my hand, but today, I am here with my wife holding my hand.’

She smiled and was quick with her repartee and pointing to my wife said, ‘You know Colonel, she is certainly more potent than the weapons you carried!’

Race to Dhaka – December 1971

The 10 JAK Rifles was raised on 1 October 1964. On the fourth day of its raising, the ‘Tenacious Tenth’ covered itself with glory. They won a MVC, for its illustrious commanding officer, and three Vir Chakras for the brave hearts, who bore the brunt against the Chinese, at Chola, in Sikkim. Once again lucky, it was ordered to be inducted into operations in East Pakistan, on the night 4-5 December 1971. We entered East Pakistan from Tura and

reached Sherpur at 0800 hours on 8 December. We camped in a school ground, and heard shouts of 'Joy Bangla'. We had a three day respite, to prepare battle action drills for the impending river crossing and to attend briefings for contingency actions.

The 85 Infantry Brigade, which was leading the advance, trounced the enemy across the Brahmaputra, at Jamalpur and moved towards Tangail. A bridge was being constructed by army engineers, however the local boatmen offered to take us across the river. Men, ammunition and weapons, were loaded in a variety of country boats and thanks to the complete air superiority achieved by the IAF, the crossing was without incident.

By the night of 12-13 December 1971, our vehicular columns were crossing the river. The overzealous amongst us started marching towards Tangail, about 40 kilometres away, through the war-torn and ravaged Jamalpur town. Enroute, I found an American helmet, and kept it as a souvenir. It was heavy and so my Sahayak Rifleman Kakaram took it from me and carried it. This helmet and Kakaram saved me from a near fatal hit, two days later.

Move Forward

At Tangail, 85 Infantry Brigade was halted on the banks of the Turag river. The enemy had demolished the bridge and was holding the far end in strength. To maintain the momentum, the General Officer Commanding 101 Communication Zone Area gave orders to our Commander 167 Mountain Brigade, to pursue the enemy relentlessly and hasten the fall of Dhaka.

Commander 167 Mountain Brigade coordinated with 85 Brigade, for the induction of a company group to cross the river stealthily. The self-contained company group was to be self-sufficient for three days and tasked to establish a road block on the Jeydebpur–Dhaka road, to ambush and destroy Pakistani troops. Jeydebpur had a major ordinance depot, which was well protected with a complement of armour. The Pakistanis expected only the Mukhti Bahini to oppose them in the area. The induction of regular

troops would certainly surprise the Pak forces, as Jeydebpur was a mere 20 kilometres from Dhaka.

Fortune Favours the Brave

Commander 167 Mountain Brigade wanted 7 Bihar to launch the ambush. Surprisingly, their commanding officer had reservations and the commander turned to our CO and asked him, 'Are you ready?' Lieutenant Colonel Nair agreed to take on the operation, and fortune fell into our lap. All available support was promised.

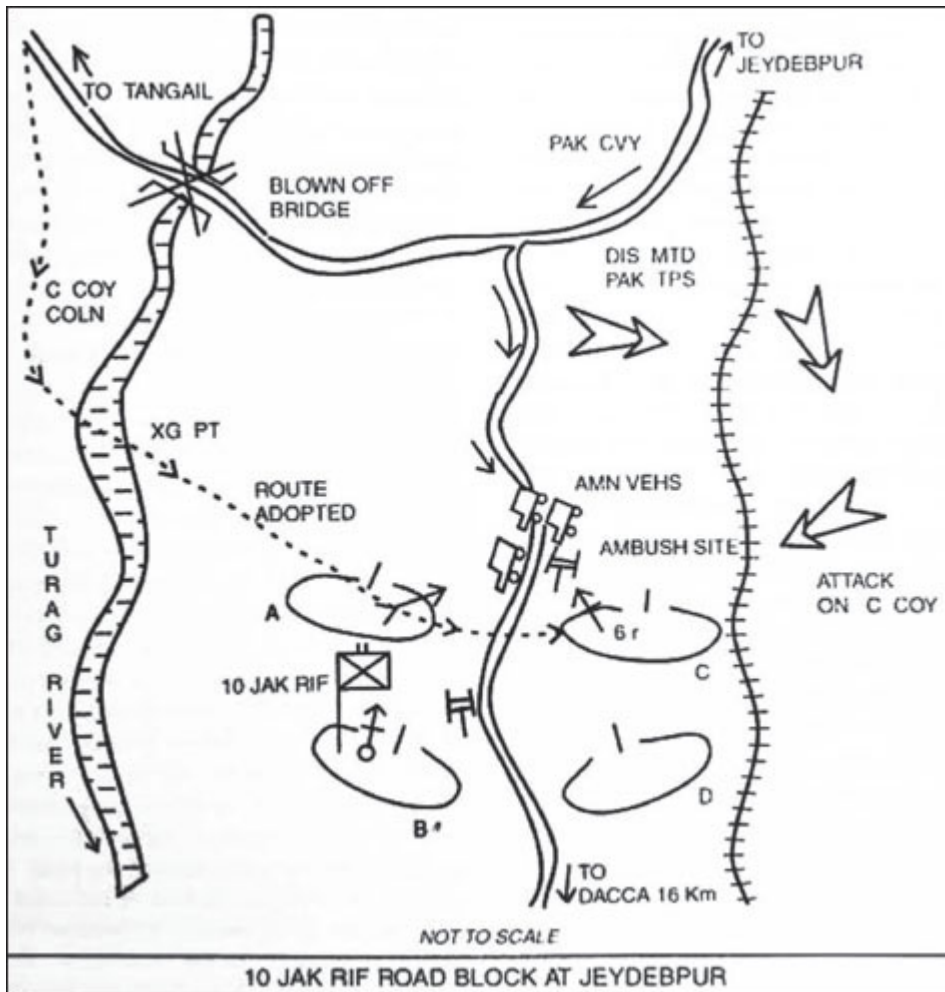
My C Company was now positioned behind 1 MLI, the leading battalions. I was thrilled, when our CO told me that we are going into action! He agreed to my request to lead the operation. The administrative and operational requirements were quickly tied up. I obtained valuable advice from Major Satish Nambiar, company commander of 1 MLI, on how to handle the Muktni Bahini guides.

Our river crossing was executed without any mishap, due to our stealth and deception. In the pitch-dark night we marched on a compass bearing to hit the road. Our orders to the 'smokers' to leave behind cigarettes was a good move, as no one coughed.

We saw a vehicle approaching, with a searchlight on patrolling duty and firing machine gun bursts at random. The vehicle movement indicated the approximate layout of the road, which was 2,000 yards away on higher ground. Naib Subedar Khajoor Singh and I proceeded ahead to select the ambush site, leaving clear instructions to the rest to move to the ambush site only on my orders. We crossed the road by spreading a rain cape and did a hop, step and jump to reach the far end, to ensure that there were no traces of mud left on the road. A few minutes later, we heard the sound of an approaching column of troops. We froze and let the column pass and resumed our reconnaissance.

We sited the subunits and the medium machine gun. Khajoor Singh went back and guided the subunits and deployed them as per the plan. The time was 2 a.m. I went round my subunits and briefed them of the need to

remain silent and exercise strict fire control. The men were motivated and itching for action. They quickly dug trenches with their shovels. I gave an all clear message to the Battalion Headquarter suggesting the immediate move of the unit to reach before first light and assuring that I would send guides.



Battle Action – Road Block, Night of 14-15 December 1971.

At around 0430 hours, Lieutenant Colonel M.N.B. Nair and Captain Prakash our adjutant were guided towards our location. I briefed them on my deployment, the road block, the ambush plan and suggested areas for the remainder of the unit to be placed. A and D Companies were deployed behind the two platoons of C Company. The rest of the units and supporting weapons were well behind to standby in reserve. A detachment of one 106

mm recoilless gun from 2 Para Regiment were deployed in A Company location. The brigade commander along with 7 Bihar Regiment would join in about five hours to guard the Dhaka approach.

In true Mukhti Bahini style, Prakash propped an old cycle rickshaw from an abandoned hut in the middle of the road. Daylight was about to break, and we were ready.

The look out sentry shouted, 'Gadi, gadi'. I saw a convoy of three vehicles approaching. As it reached the bend in the road where we had established the rickshaw block, I ordered the MMG gun detachment to fire a single warning shot, and the convoy halted. The occupants including the drivers wearing long kurtas and pyjamas, dismounted and ran for cover. There was no return fire. I surmised that it was a civilian convoy, with goods to be delivered in Dhaka. After the initial thrill of firing rounds at the enemy column, I ordered a cease fire to conserve ammunition. A patrol was sent and we learnt that the column was carrying ammunition to Dhaka. Mazdoors said that the main body of troops was to follow around mid-day. We now had three surrendered mazdoors and loaded ammunition lorries as our first catch!

We had the three vehicles parked haphazardly to serve as a road block, and collected a few LMGs of Chinese origin and ammunition.

Once again the sentry shouted, 'Jeep, jeep.'

We awaited the arrival of the speeding vehicle. It could not get past our obstacles and all the occupants including a young Captian Navashish Ali Khan were killed. His holstered pistol and two shoulder pips are war mementoes that remind us of the action.

The time was around 0930 hours. Captain Prakash Chand deployed a 106 mm RCL gun physically carried by our troops from Tangail to deal with the tank threat. A Forward Observation Officer, Captain Nirmal Singh Hira joined us for providing artillery fire support. I now felt confident and secure to face the challenge ahead.

As anticipated, around 1230 hours the column from Jeydebpur proceeding towards Dhaka was sighted. The leading tanks resorted to

prophylactic firing with medium machine guns, followed by a column of 30 troop-carrying vehicles.

A and C companies kept cool and maintained fire discipline, awaiting my signal to open up. We wanted the leading tank to get closer. The rice fields on either side restricted their movement to the road. Our plan was to take potshots at the tanks with RCL fire to surprise and demoralize the enemy.

The first tank moved closer to the road bend and briefly halted. We held on. The tank's medium machine gun fired close to our gun post. My instant decision was to restrict and halt further advance. On my signal our RCL gun reacted first with fire to surprise the enemy. Unfortunately, the round merely grazed and did not secure a direct hit on the tank.

The tank commander immediately responded and fired a burst on our MMG position. Havildar Ajit Singh, the detachment commander, was the first fatal casualty. Lance Naik Mohinder Singh, the No. 1, MMG gunner, tried to lift him from the trench by raising his shoulder and was hit. He wanted to fight on in spite of the injury. Naib Subedar Shambu Nath, the MMG platoon commander, remained in our area to oversee the MMG fire. Noticing the casualties, he rushed to help. Unfortunately, he too was hit on the left thigh and was bleeding profusely. For a while, our MMG was silent, with me at the post alone.

The tank, now turned its turret towards A Company. The troops from the vehicular column disembarked and took cover. Since the attention of the tank was diverted away from our MMG post, I quickly traversed the MMG towards the ammunition filled trucks and fired long and sustained bursts which ignited them. The RCL detachment commander too, took potshots at the lorries, causing a massive fire. Although a dangerous move, it kept the tanks and troops at bay and halted the advance for well over three hours and unnerved them.

The first tank commander expertly drove to the berm of the road, speeding towards Dhaka, bypassing our forward companies. It was eventually shot by the 7 Bihar's detachment of the 3.5 inch rocket launcher,

the tank lost control and was bogged down in the rice fields. The crew climbed out and were taken prisoner.

The second tank attempted to over run my company from the flank, however the belching fire from the ammunition lorries served as a screen and prevented its attempt. The tank eventually slipped and was bogged down in the rice fields. The crew was killed in the cross fire, eliminating the tank threat altogether.

The troop column now remained to be tackled. Only small arms fire was being exchanged by the two forward companies. This was anticipated in my initial fire planning with Captain Hira. Hira did an outstanding job and the enemy suffered huge casualties, due to artillery fire directed by him. It was a textbook operation, shifting defensive artillery fire, from one point to another. In spite of the casualties, two vicious attempts were made to attack our positions. Hearing their battle cry of 'Allah O Akbar', at close quarters was a blood-chilling experience. Both attacks were repulsed by accurate fire from the forward companies. Our ammunition was running low and needed replenishment. I sent word to Captain Prakash asking for more.

Major P.G. Ravi Krishnan commanding D company, overheard my communication and promptly ordered his MMG detachment to move to C Company area for deployment and support. I thanked him for his spontaneous response, to which he replied, 'No attack on my company can come without C Company being overrun. I am just safeguarding against such an eventuality.' Very few company commanders, especially during a battle would possess Major Ravi's attitude. Later, as a token of my gratitude, I presented him with one of Captain Navashish Ali Khan's pips that we had taken as a war memento. He cherished the gesture.

With the second MMG, the fire effect was devastating on the enemy, who were attacking us for the third time. This time the battle cry was feeble, the morale low and the progress slow, forcing retreat for the third time. However in the intense firefight, we suffered the second fatal casualty, Lance Naik Harbans Lal, in the forward platoon, succumbed to a bullet injury.

I moved around to exhort my company to bravely face the challenge and remain determined, without any fear. Rifleman Kakaram came running with my helmet that I had left behind and put it on my head cautioning me not to take it off. To this day, I cannot forget his sincerity and devotion. A stray bullet whizzed past my helmet soon after he had put it on my head!

Around 1530 hours, Captain Hira received information that artillery support would no longer be available. I retorted, 'Are we playing marbles? We are fighting a determined enemy!' He said the conversation on his wireless set may interest me. I listened and overheard the indications of a possible 'surrender' by the Pakistan Army. I immediately spoke to Lieutenant Colonel Nair who confirmed and suggested that I try to persuade the enemy to surrender. I took the hint.

At about 1600 hours during a lull in the battle, I picked up an empty bomb container and improvised it as a loudhailer. I announced in Urdu to the Pakistani troops that on humanitarian grounds, a cease fire had been ordered. I cautioned them that there was no purpose in their resistance, since a brigade of Indian troops were deployed and they had no chance. I repeated this message several times. I assured them that they would be treated as per the Geneva Convention and paraded the three captured civilian mazdoors.

My persuasion worked. Small groups of the wounded and scared troops stood up and raised their hands. I ordered them to close in and sit in small groups, after dropping their weapons and ammunition. I cautioned them to not try anything. Gradually, the numbers increased and we controlled the influx by diverting them to different areas. I wanted an officer amongst them to take charge. A major was among them, I told him to take charge, count the prisoners and give details of those that required medical attention. There was order and a proper cordon was established, I moved forward to assess the situation. We needed additional troops to guard the prisoners, which was provided by the Batallion Headquarters.

Arrangements for the cremation of our martyrs were made. I rushed to see a couple of our wounded soldiers. They had lost blood, however thanks

to timely first aid and minor surgery, our RMO Captain Shukla, ensured that they were soon out of danger.

By 1730 hours, two funeral pyres were arranged in the battlefield. I gave a moving speech extolling their virtues and their contribution. We prayed to God Almighty to grant their souls eternal peace and 'Veer Swarg'. As their company commander, I had the privilege of lighting the funeral pyre – a blessed task. The commanding officer and the adjutant attended the last rites. All the while Pakistani prisoners watched our funeral rituals and the honour bestowed on our martyrs.

Our batallion second-in-command, Major N.S. Gill had fetched up and brought the much awaited mail bag. I too received a letter from my wife, which I read by torch light in the trench that night. The next morning, I woke up early to find the Pakistani camp quiet; they had finished digging the graves. They had dug 10 graves deep enough to accomodate 10 to 12 bodies each. We observed proper decorum and gave the respect due to a martyr. We represented our army and sprinkled earth on the graves.

The Pakistani major was moved by our gesture and for the first time showed respect and said, 'Thank you, Sir.'

Around 0900 hours, our brigade commander, Brigadier Adi A. Irani, visited us at the ambush site to assess the damage and congratulate us. He said that in view of the surrender, Pakistani vehicles from Dhaka would be coming to pick us up around noon. He cautioned that we should conduct ourselves in an exemplary manner and not lower the image of the army and honour of our country. The prisoners were to be handed over to their General Headquarters at Dhaka.

Our Achievements

Major A. – Vir Chakra
Krishnaswami

Subedar – Mentioned in despatches
Sardar Singh

Naib Subedar – Mentioned in despatches

Shambu Nath

Naik Uggar Singh – Mentioned in despatches

Lance Naik Mohinder Singh – Mentioned in despatches

Gratitude

I owe life long gratitude to my loyal and trustworthy C Company, my battalion, the 10 JAK Rifles, my superiors and colleagues, who nurtured, trained and trusted me to act responsibly and competently. The opportunity came my way, which comes very rarely in one's lifetime and thanks to their efforts and divine grace, I was able to deliver. I got that opportunity and with divine grace, I was destined to succeed and narrate this story. With utter humility, I received the award on behalf of my company, which fought it out bravely and helped gain victory and glory for the battalion.

Four decades later, my war time partners, Lieutenant Colonel Nair, Gill, Prakash, Ravi Krishnan, and Naib Subedar Khajoor Singh are no more. However, I am in touch with their families.

BATTLE OF BHADURIA

CAPTAIN R.Y.S. CHAUHAN

‘Chauhan, take over command of B Company, Joshi no more.’ This was the cryptic call from Major, later Lieutenant General, P.C. Mankotia, Officiating Commanding Officer, 17 Kumaon in the thick of the battle, while we were a mere 50 metres from the objective. A number of men had fallen due to accurate enemy fire and the attack seemed to be losing momentum. I, as a second lieutenant, was the right platoon commander. The Company Commander, Major J.D. Joshi, and the left Platoon Commander, Naib Subedar Shib Singh, had already succumbed to enemy fire.

The Platoon Havildar, Devendra Singh Kandhari, who had assumed command of the platoon, after the death of Shib Singh, also died on the spot bravely fighting the enemy, while personally clearing a machine gun post-killing the crew, and snatching the gun. Kandhari of my company was awarded the Vir Chakra posthumously and the JCO with the Sena Medal, along with posthumous awards of Sena Medals to Sepoy Lila Dhar and Sepoy Dil Bahadur Thapa in recognition of their bravery and supreme sacrifice. I exhorted the men with the battle cry, ‘Kalika Mata Ki Jai’ and dashed to the enemy position. A hand-to-hand fight ensued and finally we captured the objective. A newly drafted sepoy, shortly before the battle, in utter excitement, put a primed grenade in my hand, when he was about to throw it in the house, where a Pakistani soldier was hiding. I think that it

was my sixth sense that prompted me to throw it immediately into a nearby pond, where it exploded. It is worth mentioning here that the Bhaduria crossroad in the Bogra Sector of East Pakistan, was a heavily built-up area, with lots of trees and ponds and well-defended bunkers. The place was difficult to attack, especially without armour support which was unavailable.

At Bhaduria Crossroads, 17 Kumaon confronted three rifle companies, two from 8 Baluch and one from 13 Frontier Force Regiment of the Pakistan Army. This was also supported by a troop of tanks, one recoilless gun, two 75 mm recoilless rifles, six heavy machine guns, nine medium machine guns and a battery of 105 mm guns. The enemy had also planted mines on the flanks. This post was extremely important for the Pakistan Army, specifically after losing the Battle of Hilli. Here they gave us a tough fight and fought with great determination.

In the mopping-up operations, after capturing the objective, I led a patrol to clear the enemy pockets that were causing a good deal of nuisance. In a sudden encounter, I killed two of the enemy and captured four. In a lightening quick move a single burst from my sten machine carbine killed two Pakistani soldiers and shocked the remaining four, whom we captured.

The Battle of Bhaduria was a fierce one, to say the least. It was a daylight attack, which commenced at 4:25 p.m., on 10 December 1971. The Forming Up Place (FUP) had been clearly demarcated, despite heavy artillery and heavy machine gun fire from the enemy, which caused a number of casualties, while we were waiting for the H hour signal to attack. At this time, my sahayak Mohan said, '*Saheb khana kha lo, mein laya hoon, pata nahin ladai kab tak chalegi.*' I looked at him and felt a strange bond. He offered me water in a glass cut out from a rum bottle, which he always carried for me. Just then, I heard the sound of a stray bullet coming from the enemy side that ended brushing my right shoulder and killing him. The green signal flashed in the sky indicating that it was time to attack. I could just have a glimpse of my sahayak collapsing. We got up and charged... Whenever, I recollect that moment of bonding I tear up. This relationship of

officers and men can never be fully explained. My tears bear homage to him and the martyrs of the Kumaon Regiment.

It will not be out of place to mention here, that the commanding officer of the battalion, Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Atma Singh was injured and evacuated on 9 December, the previous day when he was carrying out close reconnaissance of the objective, after occupying Maheshpur about a thousand yards from Bhaduria crossroads. Thereafter, Major (later Lieutenant General) P.C. Mankotia donned the mantle of command. Later, during the night of 10-11 December, the Pakistan Army mounted a counterattack on my (B Company) location, where I was holding the objective with one medium machine gun detachment, four other soldiers and four captured POWs in our custody. I asked Major K.B. Rao, Battery Commander of 100 Mountain Regiment and my CO on wireless, for SOS Artillery fire on my location, which was immediately provided. We not only managed to repulse the enemy counterattack, but also inflicted heavy casualties on them. I asked my men to take off their shoes, take position to fight and defend until the last bullet and last man. The enemy's call, '*Yaa Ali*' kept coming amidst the firing, but undeterred we stuck to the objective throughout the night.

After the victory of the Battle of Bhaduria, Lieutenant General J.S. Aurora, then GOC-in-C Eastern Command described it as the 'Bloodiest Battle' fought by 17 Kumaon in the Hilli-Bogra Sector of East Pakistan. Major General Lachman Singh Lehl, GOC, 20 Mountain Division during the debrief asked me, 'Chauhan, how did you get the idea that men should take off their shoes.' I replied, 'Sir, we have been taught that after a successful capture of the objective, it becomes "a defended locality", which is to be defended until the last bullet and the last man. I know that a soldier cannot run away without shoes, I had a handful of men with me, the enemy was launching a counterattack and firing continued until the next morning.'

The General laughed heartily and other senior officers also smiled. I took it as a pat.

My battalion suffered heavily in this allout maiden battle, but the gains were also tremendous. We counted 82 dead bodies of the enemy and 60

wounded. Among the arms captured, were ten machine guns, three two-inch mortars, two RCLs, a Chaffee Tank (M-24) and four rocket launchers.

The four enemy soldiers, who were captured by us remarked, '*Aap log bahut joshiley hain aur rehemdil bhi.*'

I gave first aid to one of the Baluch soldiers, who was injured on his shoulder and *shakkarparas* to eat. My battalion earned laurels, 'Battle of Bhaduria Honour' in recognition of unprecedented valour and sacrifice. Youthful enthusiasm was the hallmark of the battle, which I would like to encapsulate in the following lines:

*'Manzil unhi ko milti hai, jinke sapno mein jaan hoti hai
Pankh se kuchh nahin hota, hausley se udaan hoti hai.'*

(It is not the wings, but the will and determination that helps a flight and the goal is achieved by those whose dreams are filled with grit and determination.)

BATTLE OF MYNAMATI

COLONEL SHYAM SINGH

On Sunday, 6 November 1971, while relaxing at home, I received a message from the staff office, weapons wing, Infantry School Mhow, where I was posted. They informed me that my posting had been received and that I was required to move, preferably the same day. I was not surprised. A day earlier, I had learnt that my battalion, 7 Raj Rif was deeply involved in pre-war operations on the eastern border. In one such operation, at Dhalia, the unit had suffered heavy casualties, where many officers including the commanding officer, second-in-command, and two company commanders were seriously wounded. I left Mhow on 7 November 1971 and reached my unit, which was in Tripura, on 14 November. From that day, until the war was over, I actively participated as a company commander, in all the operations minor and major that my unit undertook.

A number of operations were carried out by 7 Raj Rif, but the one at Mynamati (Comilla) was most significant, as it earned a name for the Rajputana Rifles and the Indian Army. This battle was equally significant for me personally, as I earned my first experience of life here as a soldier in battle, and understood the value of regimentation, ethos, and motivation. Thus, the memories of various activities of those eventful days are as fresh in my mind, as if it were yesterday.

The 7 Raj Rif was part of 61 Mountain Brigade under 4 Corps and conducted its operations around Mynamati–Comilla. For operations at Mynamati, the unit was asked to infiltrate into enemy territory, as part of a brigade group. On 6 December, around 2200 hours, we crossed the international border and after covering a distance of approximately 50 kms the following day established a roadblock on the Comilla–Dacca road.

A word about the importance of Mynamati. It is a very old garrison, developed for the defence of the politically significant town of Comilla. It guarded the road axis Comilla–Daudkhandi–Dacca and Comilla–Laksham–Dacca. The defences were based on a ridgeline, next to Mynamati. This ridge also called the Lalmai Hills is an isolated feature in flat open country, rising about 150-175 ft from ground level, with an extent of approximately 4000-5000 metres by about 1500 metres and dominated the area all around it for miles.

On 9 December, at about mid-day, the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel A.S. Brar, told us in his operational briefing that the brigade commander had tasked us to launch an attack on Lalmai Hills that night itself, and to capture it by first light the next day. He told us that the enemy was holding the position, perhaps with a maximum of two companies, with regular supporting affiliations. Since there was no time for detailed reconnaissance, the company commanders, along with the commanding officer left for a quick recce of the area. After covering a distance of approximately 12 kms on a dusty country track, we halted at a small cluster of huts from where the silhouette of some hill feature could be seen. That was supposed to be Lalmai Hill, (Mynamati Ridge) on which we tried to identify our objectives and other important reference points, which could be of help at night. A small village called Digalgaon was the place from where we tried to locate our objectives. A gravel road led from there to Mynamati Ridge from the west. Time was at a premium, so after a hurried recce, we returned to our location just before last light. For the accomplishment of this task, the battalion was given one troop of PT-76 tanks (three tanks), one platoon of Engineers, and a company of 12 Kumaon. The latter was tasked to provide the firm base, at Digalgaon.

The broad outline plan was to establish a lodgement in the enemy defences on the Ridge. It was planned to attack the objective with A and D companies in phase 1 and thereafter, the remaining area would be captured by C and B companies, in phase II and III respectively. H hour was fixed at 0230 hours on 10 December. We were assured that a troop of tanks would join us at the objective by first light and pre-planned air support would be available that morning.

The unit left its roadblock position after last light and by about midnight or so, reached Digalgaon that had been secured by a company of 12 Kumaon, as our firm base. After having deployed the companies in the order of the attack plan, the commanding officer asked the battery commander to bring down artillery fire on the objective, so that direction of attack and exact location of the objective could be ascertained. The battery commander ordered the guns to fire. Major Kanwal Singh officer commanding D Company and I, with the assaulting company commanders were trying to observe the fall of shells, but could not make out anything. We however noticed that some projectiles were landing fairly close to us and scattered all over. At this stage, we learnt to our horror that these were our guns that were firing at extreme range. The brigade commander, a gunner himself, was informed about it, but notwithstanding the non-availability of fire support, he ordered that the attack must be launched that very night.

Phase 1 of the operation with A and D Companies was launched as planned. I was commanding A Company with Captain J.P. Mishra, as my second-in-command. We left the firm base around 0200 hours, on the night 9-10 December. It was a really dark night and we couldn't see a thing beyond 20-30 metres. Major Kanwal and I were moving side by side, along the narrow gravel road, leading our companies towards the objective area. After covering a fair distance, we observed a silhouette of a man on the skyline. The distance was less than 20 meters. On hearing some noise and seeing us approaching towards him, he stood up and started looking around. This man, least expecting troops from the Indian Army from that direction, challenged us casually but loudly to disclose our identity. Having lost

surprise, we decided to charge on the objective, without losing any time. The man on the hill immediately jumped into a bunker and started firing with his light machine gun. No sooner had the element of surprise been lost, the enemy opened up with medium machine guns and light machine guns from all over the hillside, including neighbouring areas on the flanks. Having startled the enemy by attacking from a most unexpected direction, the assaulting companies gained initial success on their objective, with little resistance and losses. However, as we closed on to the top of the hill, the assaulting troops came under intense and effective enemy small arms fire. Major Kanwal Singh while was seriously wounded and was later evacuated. Soon the assaulting companies started suffering casualties because of enemy's effective fire power. The momentum of our attack slowed down, due to intense enemy fire. The troops were hugging the hillside and took cover behind the boulders. It will not be out of place to mention here, that as a natural instinct, on confronting such intense hostile fire, men tend to go to ground and take cover. In normal course, it becomes difficult to make them stand up and move on to the objective again. Under such circumstances, it is the ethos and traditions of a regiment, the *izzat* of the sub-unit and unit that one belongs to and above all one's personal example and honour, which matters most. It is also at such a critical juncture that junior officers are faced with the challenge of motivating their command for accomplishment of the task, even at great personal risk.

By about 3.30 a.m., although the situation was still fluid, we had hurriedly re-grouped and reorganized ourselves and had a fair degree of control and foothold on the objective. The enemy fire continued during our efforts to consolidate the ground we had captured. By this time, all the four rifle companies were on the Ridge. The situation was very critical. Troops had not fully orientated on the ground and indiscriminate firing was going on, from both sides. The immediate requirement was to re-organize, consolidate, and firm-in on the captured ground. At this stage, we were only three officers on the objective. I was with A Company; Major Kewal Singh and Captain J.P. Mishra were with C and D Companies respectively. Our

commanding officer, second-in-command, adjutant with the Battalion HQ and battery commander's party had not yet reached the objective.

At about 0500 hours, it was almost daylight and thus, for the first time, we had a close look at the objective and the area around it. While the companies were in the process of re-organizing themselves, we observed two enemy tanks in the southeast direction, some 200 meters away from us. Before we could realize the gravity of the situation, both tanks started firing indiscriminately with their MMGs. We were taken by surprise and our men began to fall like flies. I asked my RCL gun detachment commander to engage the tanks. To my horror, I learnt that our 57 mm RCL guns were without sights. These were left behind with non-essential heavy stores. All the other companies too were facing a similar situation. The enemy became very bold and active. Our tanks which were scheduled to be on the objective at first light, did not reach. The enemy tanks continued to inflict heavy casualties and with the result, our troops had to move to the edge of the Ridge to escape. At this stage, all the four companies were occupying an area of approximately 450 metres by 150 metres on the western side. Taking advantage of our weakening position, the enemy mounted a well-coordinated counter-attack by an infantry battalion, supported by armour. Our men despite heavy odds, held on to the ground against repeated efforts by the enemy. In spite of his best efforts, he could never close in to dislodge us from our positions. The situation became desperate now. With each passing moment our men were becoming casualties. The enemy tanks were playing havoc with us. Our pre-meditated air strike did not materialize either and we had neither artillery nor armour support. It was purely an infantry battle against an all-arms-combined battle.

Being the senior-most officer on the scene, I was in constant touch with my commanding officer, at the firm base and kept him fully updated. When it seemed like matters were getting worse, I requested him to intervene. He in turn spoke to the brigade commander and insisted on immediate close air support. When this did not happen, the brigade commander spoke to me directly and suggested using RCL guns and rocket launchers to counter the enemy tank fire. I told him that I was aware of the anti-tank resources

available to us, but these are ineffective and it was becoming difficult to withstand the fury of the enemy tanks. After a pause, he asked me what I wanted. My reply to him was the same, i.e. to intervene and restore the situation. After a while, the brigade commander again spoke to the commanding officer and me to inform us that since neither immediate air support nor any other assistance could be assured, the corps commander had allowed 7 Raj Rif to withdraw.

It was a most critical moment for the battalion. We had broken the crust of the enemy defences and gained a foothold right in the centre. This was achieved at a very high cost. Three officers, including two senior company commanders were wounded and evacuated. Many men had sacrificed their lives while assaulting and fighting through the objective. An equal number were wounded and lying on the objective. At the same time, enemy tanks and artillery shelling were playing havoc with us. Almost every other minute, men were becoming casualties. We were in this dire situation not because we had exhausted our will to fight, but because our tanks had failed to reach on time and our air support, promised at first light did not materialise. It was around 0800 hours in the morning, and broad daylight. We were at a height on the Ridge with open fields all around. The enemy was holding and firing from either flank and if anyone were caught in the open, he would be picked up like a partridge in the desert. How could we leave behind our dead and wounded soldiers at the mercy of the enemy and above all how were we going to face our colleagues and kith and kin, if at all we were lucky to survive. We had so far been lucky that in spite of all these odds, the enemy tanks had not been able to come on the objective to dislodge us. Quitting at this stage would be like tripping at the finish line. These were some of the thoughts which crossed my mind, while thinking about the execution of the orders received. Major Kewal, officer commanding C Company and senior JCOs of the other two companies were next to me and heard the conversation on the radio set. It was a very hard decision, which could have a lasting impact on the history of our battalion. Therefore having analysed the consequences of all these factors, I informed the commanding officer and the brigade commander that we preferred to

continue holding on, unless physically evicted by the enemy. Thus, with the blessing of the Almighty and courage and guts displayed by our officers and men 7 Raj Rif held on to Mynamati Ridge until the end, when the enemy was forced to surrender.

Finally, we received relief for the first time at 9.45 a.m., when our air sorties materialized. Major O.P. Kaushik, brigade major (later lieutenant general and colonel of the regiment) spoke to me on the radio and asked me to indicate the targets to the mission commander. Our first and foremost targets were the enemy tanks, which were indicated with the help of landmarks close to their location. From that time onwards, we never had to look back for air support. By the afternoon, we had consolidated our position, occupied the entire area of the central portion of the Ridge, and continued to expand and dominate, until the enemy finally surrendered. To sum up, a possible defeat was turned into victory. It was due to sheer courage of the troops and above all the hand of God, with an abundance of His blessings.

During the attack on Mynamati Ridge, 7 Raj Rif suffered a loss of 35 killed and 87 wounded. We killed 43 enemy soldiers including one of the company commanders and took nine as prisoners. During this period, many more exciting moments and events took place, which shall remain part of the unrecorded history of the battalion. The success of the Battle of Mynamati was a unified effort of every man associated with the planning and execution of the operation. There were many acts of exceptional gallantry of our men, which may have gone unnoticed, but their contribution will always remain part of our glorious history. The acts of these dedicated soldiers can only be recounted and told by the veterans through word of mouth to inspire the present generation, so that they can emulate their deeds of courage and sacrifice. Traditions are thus made and carried forward from generation to generation.

52 ENGINEER REGIMENT IN A NON-CONVENTIONAL ROLE

BRIGADIER J.S. MAKKAR, VSM

The north west sector of East Pakistan, was occupied by 16 Pakistan Infantry Division, with its headquarters at Bogra. The task of capturing this sector was assigned to 20 Indian Mountain Division (Part of XXXIII Corps), and the plans of the division were executed as under:

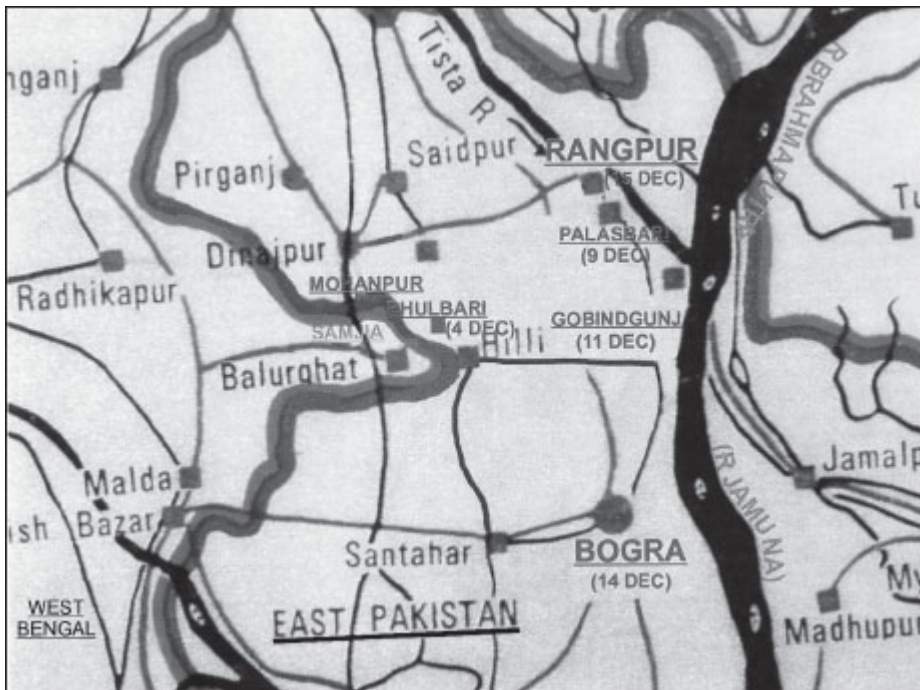
- **Phase 1:** The attack was led by 66 Mountain Brigade, from Samjia (on the Indian side of the International border) to Phulbari and onto river Karatoya.
- **Phase 2:** The attack was led by 340 Mountain Brigade up to Palasbari on the national highway Rangpur – Bogra.
- **Phase 3:** A two-pronged attack was launched by 66 Mountain Brigade from Palasbari to Rangpur in the north, and the second involved 20 Mountain Division less 66 Mountain Brigade, from Palasbari to Bogra in the south, led by 340 Mountain Brigade.

Considering the expected enormity of the engineering effort involved, five engineer regiments were placed in support of 20 Mountain Division.

The 52 Engineer Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J.S. Makkar (consisting of 7, 77 and 81 Field Companies) was assigned the task of providing engineer support to 66 Mountain Brigade, who were to lead

the advance of 20 Mountain Division. This was very fortunate for the regiment. It turned out that despite four other engineer regiments being in support, we were the only regiment to support the leading elements. We did this right from pre-D-Day preliminary operations from the international border to Palasbari, on the national highway and thereafter to Rangpur and Bogra simultaneously. It was at this place that 20 Mountain Division later took the surrender of 16 Pakistan Infantry Division.

In addition to the engineer tasks, repeatedly, our troops were called upon to act in the infantry role. Except for one engineer task of mine clearance, this story intends to cover actions performed by the regiment, in its secondary role.



Sketch showing area of operations – 52 Engineer Regiment

Mine Breaching at Bridge Site over the Ichhamati River, at Phulbari

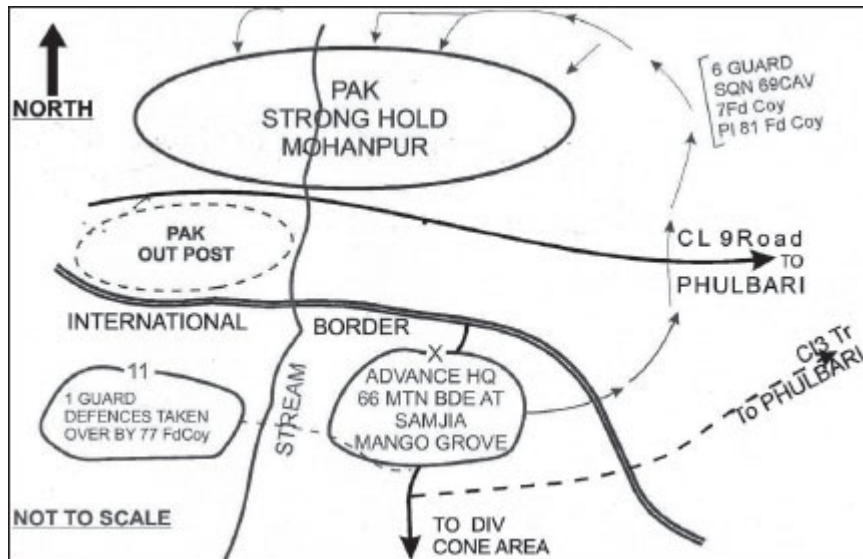
For the division to continue its advance, the Ichhamati river had to be crossed at Phulbari, where the existing bridge had been demolished and the riverbanks were expected to be mined.

The wet gap of the river and site conditions turned out to be much more difficult than mentioned in intelligence reports before the war. Instead of three to four hours of delay anticipated at the site, it was now visualized that the bridging task would take anywhere between ten to twelve hours.

It was quite understandable that the enemy would have demolished the existing bridge and laid mines on our side of the riverbed. To permit the bridging operations to commence, a minimum area of approximately 100 feet along the river and 50 feet in depth would need to be cleared of mines. Conventional methods of mine breaching would take the better part of the night. Time being of utmost importance in such an operation, longer delays as visualized now were totally unacceptable. (As confirmed by GOC 16 Pakistan Division after the war, a delay of additional 24 hours would have permitted the Pakistan Army to occupy fresh defences on Karatoya river, which could have changed the entire course of the operations). In consultation with Second Lieutenant A.S. Mac, Platoon Commander 81 Field Company, and the troops, the commanding officer 52 Engineer Regiment decided to take the life-threatening and risky option of forming a human chain, parallel to the river line, with the CO and platoon commander in the centre, platoon JCO at one end and platoon havildar, at the other. This human chain undertook mine clearance, by shuffling over the sand bank up to the river line. It was also unanimously agreed that in case of any casualty over mines, the clearing operations would continue and the wounded would be attended to after the home bank was declared safe from mines. This single act at once exhibited total dedication to duty (unmindful of the risks involved) highest levels of motivation and total faith in the leadership.

Occupation of Defences by 77 Field Company at Samjia

Across the stream at Samjia, 1 Guards had occupied a mango grove, which was a short distance away from an enemy post. Across the international border was a stronghold of the Pakistan Army, at Mohanpur, guarding the road to Phulbari. It was decided to capture these Pakistani posts, as a preliminary operation before D-Day.



Outline Plan for Capture of Pak Strong Hold at Mohanpur

On the night of 30 November and 1 December 1971, 6 Guards, a squadron of 69 Cavalry supported by 7 Field Company for track maintenance and platoon of 81 Field Company, in close support role, carried out an out flanking move to attack Mohanpur outpost, from the rear. At this juncture, the commander of 66 Mountain Brigade, to create a brigade reserve, ordered 1 Guards to pull out and 77 Field Company was ordered to take over their defences. This defensive position was not only a registered target of Pakistan Army artillery, but was also on the fixed line of their automatic weapons. In addition, fire from our own tanks firing at Mohanpur, from their rear flew over our defences.

Under the cover of darkness 77 Field Company under Major Madhav Arren, took over defences from 1 Guards and faced intense artillery, armour and automatic fire from all directions and held out against all odds.

Due to the surprise achieved by 6 Guards and Squadron 69 Armoured Regiment, the enemy was totally overwhelmed. Platoon 81 Field Company, under Second Lieutenant A.S. Mac joined 6 Guards to overrun the enemy defences and succeeded in capturing some Razakars and Pakistani troops, belonging to a Baluch battalion.

Clearing the Enemy Post at Gobindganj

The commanders of 340 Mountain Brigade and 52 Engineer Regiment were moving along the national highway, towards Bogra. Ahead of Gobindganj, it was found that the advance of the leading battalion was held up. The commanding officer of the infantry battalion reported that his leading troops were coming under heavy fire, from a Pakistani post. He also had no immediate reserves to deploy against the enemy. On request from the brigade commander, the commanding officer of 52 Engineer Regiment, ordered platoon 81 Field Company, under Lieutenant Yadav to launch an attack from the rear and clear the enemy post. Pakistani troops, totally surprised, abandoned their defences and withdrew towards Bogra, permitting the Indian Army to resume its advance.

Capturing a Bridge over River Karatoya Intact

After launching a bailey bridge over a demolished concrete bridge at Gobindganj, over the Karatoya river, we still had to cross the river once more, before reaching the final objective of Bogra.

When the leading column of the infantry battalion, supported by a platoon from 81 Field Company, which was commanded by a JCO, approached this bridge, they found enemy troops working feverishly on the far bank. The JCO realized that Pakistani troops were preparing the concrete bridge for demolition. Without a moment's hesitation and without considering the danger involved, the platoon assault across the bridge. The Gurkhas of the infantry battalion, not to be left behind, joined the assault with vigour over the bridge, dislodging the Pakistani troops. Platoon of 81 Field Company engineers then neutralized the explosive charges and ensured that the bridge was safe for traffic. This considerably reduced the time to contact the final stronghold of the Pakistan Army at Bogra. In case the Pakistanis had stood their ground and opened fire at us instead of running away, they would not only have inflicted heavy casualties on our troops, but also succeeded in demolishing the concrete bridge, thereby delaying us inordinately.

Hand-to-Hand Fight

After a part of Bogra town was captured, our troops started clearing stray pockets of resistance. By now, the morale of the Pakistani troops was in their boots. Commanding officer 6 Guards with a few of his men and accompanied by Second Lieutenant A.S. Mac and a section of 81 Field Company was going through the built up area of Bogra town. Moving along a road, the party suddenly saw a Pakistani tank emerging from a by lane. Without thinking for a moment Lieutenant Mac along with his men, attacked the tank, pulled out the tank commander and saved the CO and all the men of his party.

The tank was fully armed and if they had used their weapons, the party would have been easily liquidated. However, the low morale of Pakistani troops and the shock of seeing foot soldiers attacking a tank had totally paralysed the enemy and they were captured, without offering much resistance.

Conclusion

General officer commanding 20 Mountain Division paid the greatest tribute to the regiment, when he told commanding officer 52 Engineer Regiment after the war, 'If intelligence reports had indicated, prior to the war, that the "going" was even half as bad as it turned out to be, I would perhaps have never embarked on this venture. The Pakistan Army was not only totally surprised by our chosen axis of attack, but also the speed with which the division moved through this inhospitable terrain, without proper roads/tracks and bridges. Thanks to the ceaseless and untiring efforts of your men, I was able to achieve my objectives successfully.'

In recognition of its outstanding performance, the regiment was awarded, a 'Theatre Honour – East Pakistan 1971'. The regiment was also awarded a 'War Trophy'. Further, GOC XXXIII Corps, informed me at a function, celebrating Signals Corps Day on 16 February 1972 that he had forwarded 22 citations of the regiment. In addition to citations forwarded through engineer channels, a number of these were also initiated by

infantry, armour, and artillery commanders. These mostly pertained to our performance in an infantry role. I have often wondered as to the cause of most of these being rejected by higher Headquarters above HQ XXXIII Corps!

TRIUMPHANT MARCH

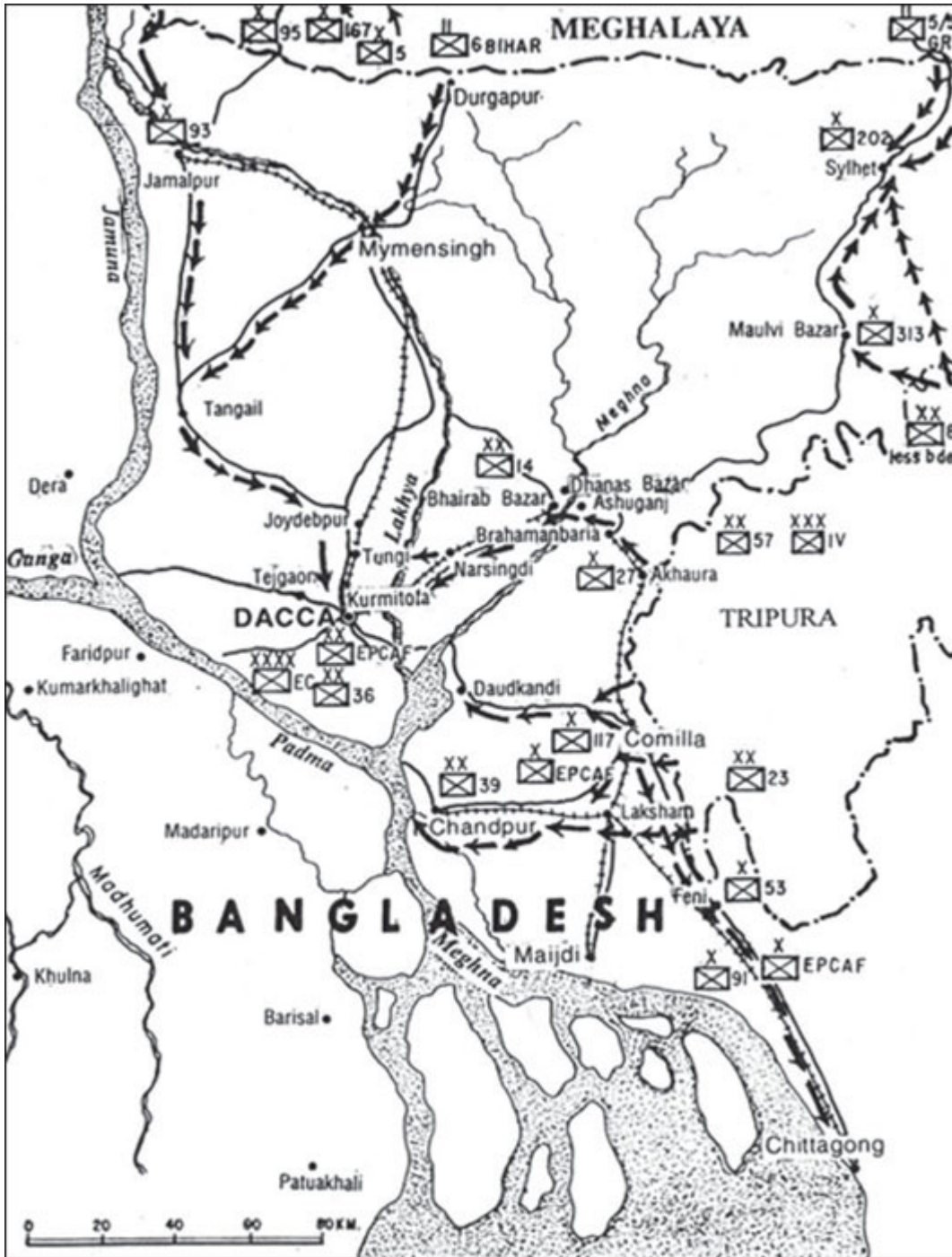
AGARTALA TO DHAKA 1971

COLONEL K.S. MANN

When I got my orders in January 1971, to join 15 Engineer Regiment, located at Masimpur (Silchar–Assam) little did I know that, I would be actively involved in the Bangladesh freedom struggle and experience activities, which no books and journals can really describe.

Hell broke loose in neighbouring East Pakistan, when in March 1971, Pakistan let loose genocide to destroy forever the political aspirations of the people of East Pakistan. Clouds of war started hovering when millions of refugees poured in to India, due to the ruthless crackdown by the East Pakistan Army, led by Lieutenant General Tikka Khan. With the possibility of war hanging in the air, military activity increased. There was a heavy demand on information regarding conditions of roads and bridges in Assam and Tripura. Since I was dealing with this aspect, I detailed a team of officers to collect the information by physical verification. Over the next month, the information was collected, correlated, and formulated into Road Data Cards. Later, this data proved to be very useful and handy, not only for the division, but also for IV Corps and Eastern Command Headquarters. *Operation Cactus Lily* was declared on 15 August 1971 and preparation for war commenced. My regiment, along with 57 Division Headquarters and

other divisional units moved from Masimpur to Agartala covering a distance of 180 kms. As part of my responsibility, I made sure electricity and water supply to all the units was organized.



Sketch showing area of operations of 57 Mountain Division.

The 15 Engineer Regiment was asked to swap their .303 rifles for 7.62 SLRs, and signal communication was changed from the old 61 Wireless sets to 25 ANPRC sets. It was challenging to get used to this sudden change, but with the help of the infantry and signal units, I successfully completed the conversion, just war broke out.

For its role in *Operation Cactus Lily*, 57 Mountain Division was to operate less one brigade, which was held as corps reserve. The 311 Mountain Brigade, along with 73 Mountain Brigade was to brush aside opposition, at Akhaura, located just five kilometres west of Agartala and to proceed south, to general area Daud Kandi–Comilla.

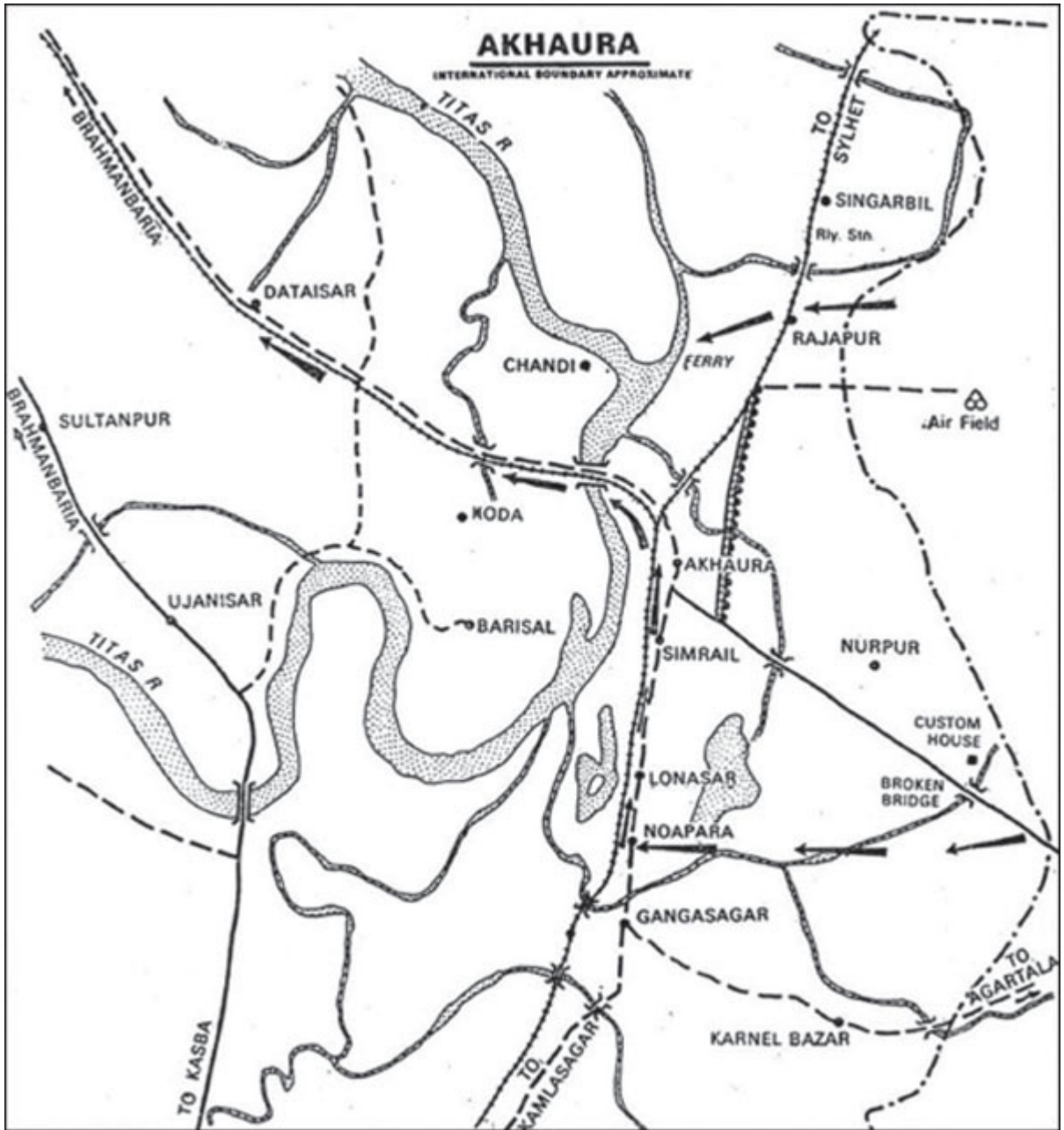
I was assigned a special role for which I was to first be briefed by the division and then proceed to the forward most infantry unit, assess the engineering effort required and finally, inform the regimental headquarters. To ensure that the regiment got the information in time, my day would start as early as 0300 hours. And by the end of the day, I had to report the progress of tasks allotted to the regiment.

The battle of Akhaura lasted from 1 to 5 December and 311 Mountain Brigade fought a classic battle of deception. A feint attack was launched from the northeast, but instead the thrust was made from the south. Our artillery harassed the enemy, incessantly for three days and nights. The Engineer Regiment quickly restored disrupted communications and paved way for further action.

The bridge on the Agartala–Akhaura road was blown apart by the withdrawing enemy on the night of 1 December. The following day, I carried out a reconnaissance and an engineer task force was dispatched to construct a 150 ft long Bailey bridge over the river. Restoration of the destroyed bridge began in full swing. In the afternoon, when I went to inspect the progress, I was horrified to find the entire task force in trenches to protect themselves from sporadic shelling by the enemy. I stood at the bridge site and directed the engineers to get the bridge functional. By nightfall, the bridge was completed and available for our forces to advance.

To impede our advance, the enemy once again blew up a remaining bridge on the second night. The next morning, while I was carrying out an

inspection, I was surprised to see Major General Ben Gonsalves, GOC 57 Mountain Division at our site. He asked me how much time would be required to reconstruct the bridge and remove the land mines laid across the road by the enemy. I assured him that both jobs would be undertaken simultaneously and would be accomplished within six hours. Satisfied, the GOC being satisfied proceeded to other areas of operation. As promised, the task of constructing yet another 150 ft Bailey bridge and the removal of enemy land mines was accomplished, by the end of the day.



Sketch showing area of operations of 15 Engineer Regiment – Akhaura.

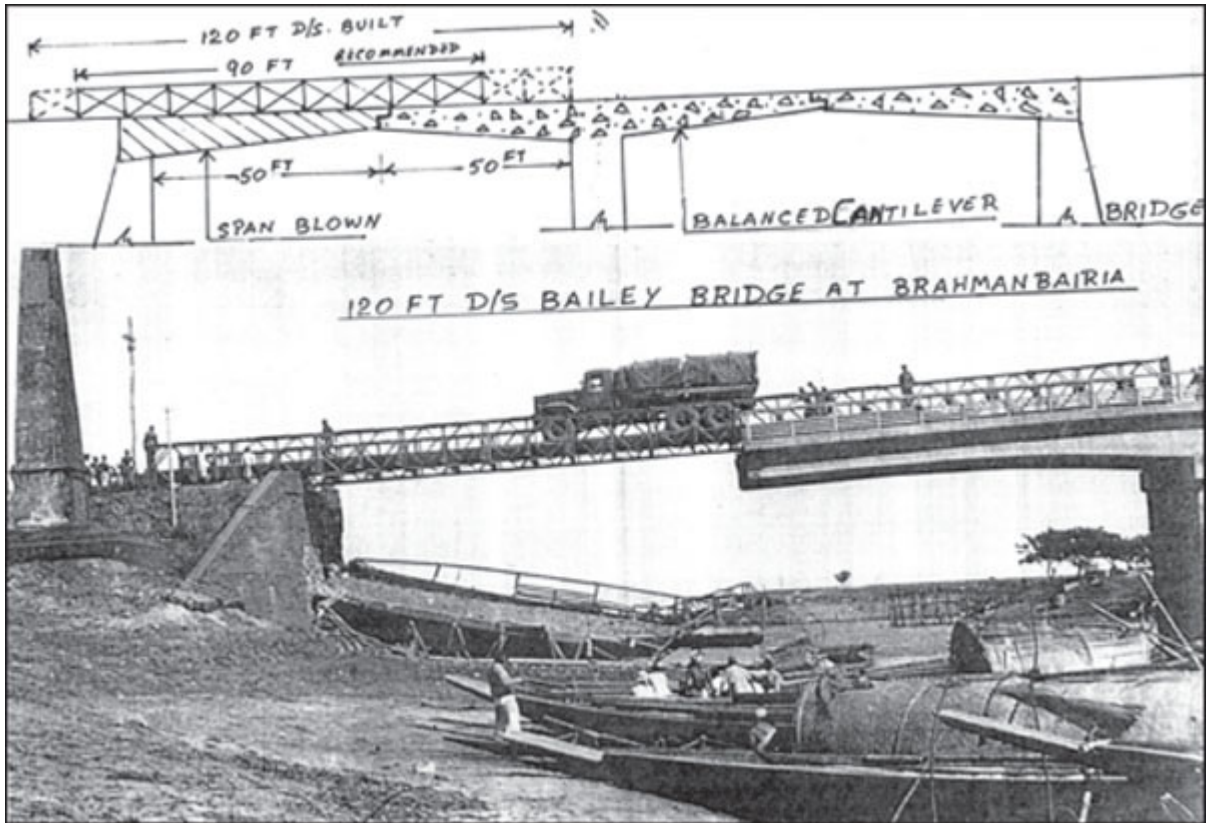
On the night of 3 December, the enemy once again tried to delay the advance of 311 Mountain Brigade by creating huge making on the road. The task of resurfacing the damaged road was also promptly completed during the day. While the engineers were opening the road for the division to advance, the infantry won the battle of Akhaura by 5 December. While the infantry units were pursuing the withdrawing enemy, I was asked to

arrange a crossing on the Titus river, at Akhaura, to enable vehicles of the brigade and the division to cross over. For this, the engineer task force constructed three types of ferries and the crossing was accomplished successfully.

When I reached the forward most battalion on 6 December afternoon, I was informed that the advance was held up due to a well-fortified bunker. To our good luck, just at that precise moment, a sortie of the Indian Air Force arrived, destroyed the bunker with rockets, and strafed the area. Witnessing this destruction by the air sortie was one of my most thrilling moments of the war, something I had not experienced earlier.

Due to the pincer movement by 73 and 311 Mountain Brigade, the East Pakistani forces withdrew from Brahman Baria, without putting up a fight. They left their mark by blowing up the only road bridge on the Titus, on the night of 7 December. The next day, while I was assessing the damage done to the bridge, Major General Ben Gonsalves and Brigadier J.S. Bawa, the artillery brigade commander arrived to assess the quantum of delay that would hold up the advance. The GOC asked me to cross the river and find out if the enemy had mined the far bank. With the help of a local boat, I crossed over and there the locals took me around. After inspection, I confirmed to the GOC that a few mines were planted on the berms of the home bank, but there were no mines on the far bank. I also informed him that the bridge would soon be restored. The GOC was satisfied and remarked that he now realized how important the engineers are in the movement of military forces. The engineer task force constructed the bridge on the night of 8 December.

On 10th December morning, while the retreating Pakistani Army was being pushed towards Ashuganj, I was assigned the task of finding jetty sites for crossing the huge river Megna that was 4000 to 5000 ft wide. I identified some suitable jetty sites and reported that with the help of available local boats, it was possible to cross the mighty Meghna. That night 73 Mountain Brigade, along with a company of engineers crossed the river.



Bailey Bridge constructed by 15 Engineer Regiment at Brahman Bairia.

At this juncture, 57 Mountain Division took a bold decision to drop 311 Mountain Brigade behind enemy lines, via a heliborne operation. On the night of 9-10 December, 311 Mountain Brigade along with manpacked artillery guns were dropped, near Narsinghdi, which is located just 33 kms short of Dhaka. On the night of 10-11 December, my commanding officer and I were dropped at Narsinghdi. The helicopter hovered at about a height of 10 ft above the ground, over the paddy fields and I was made to jump down with my big pack and personal weapon strapped to my back. From the paddy fields, I footed down to Narsinghdi Jute Mills, a distance of three kilometres. En-route, I sighted three scooter rickshaws parked at the petrol pump. I immediately got hold of them. They proved very handy and were later used extensively by the GOC, Colonel G.S., and the CO Engineer Regiment. The Advance Division Headquarters entrusted me with two tasks. First, I was asked to make an ALG for the GOC to land at Narsinghdi and second to provide electricity supply to the Headquarters itself. Since the

field companies had not yet arrived, I took help of the locals to level the paddy field bunds, mark the corners of the ALG with *chuna* and somehow erected a makeshift windsock. For the disrupted electric supply, I hunted down an operator for the generating sets. He turned out to be a West Pakistani called Bihari. He agreed to help me on the promise that he would not be handed over to the Mukti Bahini. I agreed to his request and he quickly got to work. He primed the generator sets and restored the much-needed electricity by the evening.

Though 73 Mountain Brigade had joined 311 Brigade to march into Dhaka, instructions were received from higher Headquarters to go slow, since there was a possibility of surrender by East Pakistan. As expected, East Pakistan forces on 16 December 1971, surrendered to the Eastern Command of the Indian Army at 1630 hours, at Dhaka Race Course. The following day, the Engineer Regiment made ferrying arrangements, at Demra Ferry, located nine kilometres away from the race course. The personnel of Advance Division Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel O.P. Bahl, and my commanding officer crossed, along with their jongs. My dispatch rider, with his motorcycle and I were also ferried across the Lakhiya river. On seeing me, astride the pillion of my DR's motorcycle, the Bangladeshi crowd wildly cheered. On reaching, I was directed to take over the accommodation for occupation, by the Engineer Regiment, from the East Pakistan Civil Armed Force (EPCAF), located at Pilkhana.

When I drove to HQ EPCAF, at Pilkhana, I do not know who was more surprised, the Pakistanis or me! Even the brigadier was dumbfounded seeing me there, astride a motorcycle! I was equally bemused to find Pilkhana crawling with over 3,000 Pakistani troops, fully armed to the teeth. Though the situation was unnerving, I stuck to my guns and demanded accommodation. EPCAF were left with no other alternative, but to vacate a building and accommodate my companion and me. A hot inviting cup of tea was served, while fresh beddings with mosquito nets were being arranged, to make me comfortable. Further, a Pathan orderly was detailed for me. For the first time in over a week, I had a warm, refreshing bath and wore an ironed uniform.

This being Victory Day, I wanted to celebrate, rejoice and raise a toast to the Indian Army. Therefore, I proceeded to the EPCAF Officer's Mess. As expected, I found the atmosphere depressing, so I decided to drive to Dhaka Intercontinental Hotel, where a PT-76 tank was triumphantly parked. At the bar, I befriended Mohammad Hamid, who I pleasantly discovered had at one time donned the colours of Dhaka Sporting Football Team. I could find no better company, so we raised a victory toast together. Our friendship was spread over many evenings, where I learnt more intimately about the happenings in East Pakistan, prior to the arrival of the Indian Army and the expectations of the Bangladeshi's. Later, I had a number of discussions with my friend Hamid, at the Dhaka Club, during which it transpired that at the time of disobedience, the West Pakistani's, who were called Biharis were at the receiving end and took shelter with Bengali friends. With the crackdown by General Tikka Khan, the tables were turned. Now, with the Mukti Bahini ruling the roost – it was back to square one. The general grouse of the Bangladeshis was that the West Pakistanis were exploiting East Pakistan, at the expense of the Bengalis. Tea was exported from East Pakistan and dollars earned and beer produced in West Pakistan was sold to East Pakistan, at twice the cost.

That night and for one more day, I dined with EPCAF. Though they were discomforted with my presence, but I wanted to drive home the point that they had lost the war and were now POWs. Well, my only Indian soldier refused to be served by the Pakistani's, lest they poison him. So to dine outside in a restaurant, I gave him some Indian currency, which was much in demand. However, I continued to be housed among Pakistanis and ate food that was prepared by them.

While I waited for my regiment, which had still not fetched up, I decided to take this opportunity to explore Dhaka Cantonment and the city by myself. So I got on to a Bullet motorcycle, which was the only conveyance I had at that time and set out on my mission. The Cantonment was mostly intact. The Indian Air Force had cratered the northern end of the airfield, which was common to both civil and Pakistani Air Force. I was surprised to find 18 Sabre Jets parked in the hangers. On closer inspection, I

found that all the jets were strafed and damaged by the IAF. The ATC however was unscathed. Lieutenant General A.K. Niazi's operation room was intact, with maps predominately marked in red. The Cantonment was crawling with East Pakistani soldiers, fully armed and guarding the entrances. The Dhaka Army Canteen was well stored with foreign liquor, goods, cars, and motor cycles. Since liquor was not officially served, one could buy a bottle from the well-stocked canteen.

Later in the afternoon, I went to 'Betul Mukaram', the Mosque-cum-shopping complex in the heart of the city. There, I met Mukti Bahini personnel, who coaxed me to accompany them to meet their parents in old Dhaka. I hesitantly agreed and it was heart rendering to meet the overjoyous parents of superheroes, which the Mukti Bahini had been made to be. In their excitement, they took my carbine and fired aimlessly in the air. Incidentally, these were the only bullets fired from my weapon during the war. While I was returning, I could hear sporadic firing in pockets of resistance. I reluctantly returned to Pilkhana to find that my regiment had still not fetched up and I had no choice but to sleep one more night, with the enemy.

Finally, the regiment arrived and while they were still in the process of settling down and overcoming the hangover of victory celebrations; engineering tasks started flowing in thick and fast. I took over as adjutant, because the commanding officer and adjutant proceeded on leave. Our regiment not only disarmed troops at Dhaka, but also the troops of East Pakistan 12 Infantry Division, which was located at Bahirab Bazaar. The regiment also had to clear mines left behind by East Pakistan. Since the bomb disposal units of the Indian Army were awaited, all we had to do was to neutralize the unexploded bombs. In the absence of inland water units, we had to pitch in to operate civil ferries at Demra, Katchpur, and Sadarghat for crossing over of civilians. Our regiment escorted POWs to Narayanganj, from where they were shipped to India. Another task was to retrain the Mukti Bahini into National Militia.

Just before the Indian Army pulled out of Dhaka, a request from Bangladesh was entertained to construct accommodation, at Chittagong Hill

Tracks, for the Bangladesh Army. For this, I was detailed to recce the airstrip at Cox's Bazaar, 90 kms South of Chittagong. (Incidentally, this was the very place where my father served in 1943, in support of Battle of Arakans) Under Operation Jungle Jim, 61 Mountain Brigade assisted by the Engineer's 432 Field Company constructed accommodation for 10 camps, made water supply provision and constructed 14 helipads. With the rehabilitation works completed, time had come to say good-bye to Bangladesh. For this, a grand farewell parade was organized on 12 March 1972. The Bangla Bandhu Stadium was turned into a fort. President's Body Guard horses were flown in, tanks, and artillery guns were mounted on pedestals. The infantry, artillery and the engineer contingents took part in the parade. Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the first Prime Minister of the newly liberated country not only took the salute but also gave a rousing and thrilling address. However, the half-empty stadium reflected the mood of the newly liberated nation.

After the farewell parade, 15 Engineer Regiment started pulling out back to Agartala. On the way back, the regiment crossed through Daud Kandi, Mynamati Cantonment of Comilla, the original objective of the division. By nightfall, the regiment reached India, after four months on foreign soil. At Agartala, I handed over the post of adjutant and moved on posting to the western theatre and thereby hangs another tale.

BATTLES OF PIRGANJ AND BOGRA

COLONEL ITBAR SINGH

My Battalion, i.e. 2/5 GR (Frontier Force) as part of 340 Independent Infantry Brigade Group, moved from Trivandrum in August 1971 to the border of East Pakistan and finally crossed the border after the war started in December 1971. During the war, the battalion was called upon to take part in two main battles, at Pirganj and Bogra.

The 20 Mountain Division, under command of 340 Independent Infantry Brigade Group was responsible for the operations in this sector. The divisional plan was to outflank the defences of Hilli from the north and capture its rear positions to culminate in the capture of Bogra. The Division advanced from Patiram to Samjhia and on to Mohanpur bridge. This bridge was captured on 2 December 1971. However, Pakistani troops in an effort to safeguard Dinajpur blew up the bridge, from our direction. The division thereafter advanced along axis Mohanpur Bridge-Phulbari-Charka-Bhaduria. The engineer brigade of 20 Mountain Division did a wonderful job of converting the railway line from Phulbari to Charka, into a solid road overnight by blasting the railway line off the embankment and levelling it. This road was capable of taking heavy vehicular traffic.

From Bhaduria onwards, 340 Independent Infantry Brigade Group led the advance into East Pakistan. The brigade started by establishing a roadblock at Pirganj, thereby cutting off Rangpur in the north from Bogra in the south. One brigade each of Pakistan's 16 Infantry Division was known

to be located at Rangpur and Bogra respectively. The 340 Infantry Brigade thereafter advanced south towards Bogra on 14 December.

The Battle of Pirganj

The 2/5 GR (FF) had concentrated at Bhaduria by 1830 hours on 6 December. The battalion had earlier taken part in the capture of Mohanpur bridge. The commander of 340 Independent Infantry Brigade Group reached the battalion at 2300 hours that day, and briefed the commanding officer about the impending task as follows:

- (a) Battalion to concentrate west of Krakatoa river;
- (b) Battalion to marry up with PT-76 tanks on 7 December by 0900 hours;
- (c) Be prepared to establish roadblock at Pirganj; and
- (d) Final orders would be given by GOC 20 Infantry Division.

The Battalion moved after a couple of hours and concentrated on west of the Krakatoa River, by 1100 hours on 7 December. The route was very bad and no recovery vehicles were available. At one place, the entire battalion had to get off their vehicles, cut branches of trees with their khukris and lay them down on the track and then push all the vehicles, one by one, to get them across bad patches. At the ferry, where the engineers were busy constructing a bridge, meals were quickly cooked and issued to the men, including haversack dinners. The divisional commander arrived and gave out his verbal orders to the brigade commander and the commanding officer, including commanding officer of the 69 Armoured Regiment.

The area of the crossing was a sight to behold. The vehicles at the crossing were six to eight abreast for a distance of about two miles. After the GOC finished his briefing, he had to wait for an hour during which the Provost Unit was busy clearing the way for his jeep to go back to his headquarters.

A and C Companies mounted on PT-76 tanks crossed the Krakatoa River and sped towards Pirganj. By 1600 hours on 7 December, C Company dismounted from the tanks short of Pirganj, and swept through

the town forcing the enemy's two companies-strong troops to pull out. The tanks and the Gorkhas surprised the enemy. The C Company, with a squadron of tanks also ambushed Pakistan's GOC 16 Infantry Division. Major General Nazir Shah Hussein in one jeep and Brigadier Tajumal Husain Malik, commander 205 Infantry Brigade of the Pakistan Army in another, while they were spotted returning from Rangpur. However, both, the general and the brigadier, miraculously escaped leaving behind their jeeps. When the company commander and the company officer went up to the jeeps they found the GOC's fully marked operational maps, giving detailed dispositions of troops in the Hilli Sector. The seized maps proved to be immensely useful in planning successful of further operations in this sector.

After having successfully cleared Pirganj, the C Company with a squadron of armoured vehicles moved further south and took up positions in the Mile 26 area to face the inevitable counter-attack by the enemy from Bogra. The armoured squadron, along with the Regimental Headquarters, decided to harbour about 150 yards east of the road, in Mile 26, and asked the company commander to provide protection. The company commander deployed two platoons for security of the tank harbour and with the third platoon he took up defences astride road at Mile 26 at 1800 hours. Meanwhile, a company with the other squadron of tanks had reached Laldighi Bazaar area and took up positions facing Rangpur in the north. The B and D Companies, which had started on foot, reached east and west of Pirganj by 2200 hours.

As officer commanding support company, I finally crossed over with the F echelon vehicles at 1700 hours. A number of vehicles of the brigade group had crossed over earlier. The track on the other side was a cart track with numerous ruts. After travelling for about two miles, we were stuck in a traffic jam. I realised that if I were to take all the vehicles to Pirganj, I would not reach my battalion before first light. Hence, I decided to let my senior JCO bring up the one-ton and three-ton vehicles. I however made sure that the Platoon Commander Captain J. N. Sood and the 106 mm RCL guns moved with me, as I was aware of the need for anti-tank weapons

against an armour-supported Pakistani counter-attack. An incident during the 1965 war, where we lost hard-won ground across the Ichhogil Canal due to lack of anti-tank guns, was clear in my mind.

At about 2200 hours, I got a message that two of my unit F echelon vehicles loaded with ammunition had overturned and there were five casualties, one of them serious. I managed to get a jeep to evacuate them and sent my nursing assistant along to help. As I finished all this, the brigade commander finally arrived. He too was caught up in the traffic jam and had to abandon his jeep and he came up to me. We formed a jeep convey with the RCL platoon commander leading, the brigade commander following and finally the RCL jeeps. We were met by two jeeps of the reconnaissance troop of the armoured regiment and were escorted to the tank harbour and the C Company location. I started looking for my Commanding Officer. I finally found him near the 7 Platoon of the C Company, which was deployed astride the main road axis. This was at about 0145 hours. As I was explaining to my commanding officer that I had managed to get only the RCL jeeps through and that the rest of the vehicles could be expected only after first light, the enemy began shelling the area. The bombing was quite accurate and a few projectiles fell within 50 yards of us.

Meanwhile, we got a message that the commanding officer was wanted by the brigade commander in the tank harbour. The officer therefore left immediately. He did not even have time to brief me about the battalion layout. Left to myself, I went about and found myself with the depth section of 7 Platoon of the C Company. I found out about the layout of the C Company, from the section commander and decided to stay on with the section. Meanwhile, the shelling intensified. I could also hear the sound of bombs falling on A Company, north of Pirganj. I had my radio set with me and I therefore knew what was happening. I got hold of my batman, the drivers, and my radio operator and told them to dig down. As I was only 100 yards from the forward trenches, I could hear the company commander shouting to his boys to man the trenches. He had left his company headquarters in the tank harbour and gone to the 7 Platoon. The RCL

platoon commander, who had come with me, told me that he was going to disperse his RCL jeeps and return after having done so. I informed the company commander about my location on the radio. At that time in the 7 Platoon there were four officers, the company commander and his company officer (who was the section commander of one of the forward sections) the RCL platoon commander, and myself.

The inevitable counter attack came simultaneously on A Company from the north and on C Company from the south at 0205 hours on 8th December. Although the attack on the A Company was supported by artillery, the attack finally petered out by 0300 hours. Fortunately, there were no casualties.

The attack on C Company was supported by mortar fire. It was directed on 7 Platoon holding the defences astride the main road axis, supported by a section of MMGs. The enemy attacked with two companies of 32 Baluch. I later learnt that this attack was led by their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sultan Mahmud. The enemy was seen approaching in the light of a full moon. The company commander ordered his men to hold their fire until the enemy was close enough. When they were a mere 50 yards away, the platoon opened up with all that they had. The enemy responded by firing from the hip and a couple of their MMGs opened up from the right. The enemy went down shouting, 'Ya Ali' and 'Allah hu Akbar' and continued returning fire. As there were no mines or wire obstacles ahead of the platoon, by relentless pressure and making use of the dugouts and taking cover of the big trees lining the road, the enemy closed within grenade throwing range. So far, the two-inch mortars and rifle grenades were used. Now, a close quarter fight ensued in which hand grenades were freely used.

The enemy having closed in charged the MMG position and the forward trenches. Their commanding officer, who was brought down by the first MMG, only five yards away, led this charge. Two more soldiers crying 'Ya Ali' managed to get up to one of the forward trenches. One of them was bayoneted, while the other was despatched with a khukri. This assault was beaten back by 0400 hours. In the process, two of our men were killed and three were wounded apart from the company officer, who was moving

about the trenches to motivate his men when he was hit below the knee. The enemy fire intensified and they closed in once again in a desperate bid to retrieve the body of their commanding officer. This time they tried to outflank the platoon by moving to the left. Sensing their intentions, I moved the LMG section and a few men to the right and opened up from there. They tried to silence us with their MMG, however, since our gun was located behind a tree and was defiladed to their MMG, they failed and gave up this plan.

The enemy closed in on to the forward trenches for the last time. Once again, making use of the dugouts on both sides of the road and the trees lining the road, he closed in to grenade throwing range. Finally, a hand grenade fight followed in which an enemy grenade landed right on top of the breechblock of the MMG. Besides killing the entire detachment, the MMG too was completely destroyed. The enemy however did not succeed in advancing any further and eventually withdrew. They managed to drag away most of their dead and wounded and finally broke contact at 0500 hours. I Captain Sood, the RCL Platoon Commander, and I decided to go and man the MMGs. Unfortunately, he was killed by enemy machine gun burst.

As anticipated, the capture of Pirganj was not a problem. It was holding onto the road block which was hurriedly occupied in darkness against the enemy counter-attack that proved tough. Our casualties in this battle were one officer and six other ranks Other Ranks killed and two officers and three other ranks wounded. Enemy casualties, as mentioned by the second-in-command of 32 Baluch later, were 20 killed and 45 wounded. The slain included their commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Sultan Mahmud and two enemy soldiers, who were left behind in our trenches and whom I buried the next day.

The Battle of Bogra

I took command of the C Company on 8 December 1971, when the company commander was wounded at Pirganj. From 8 until 12 December,

the battalion was given the task of holding Pirganj and providing flank protection to the brigade, which had commenced its advance on Bogra. After the capture of the Mahasthan Ferry, the battalion was asked to lead the advance to Bogra on the night of 13-14 December. The battalion advanced up to Mile 4, north of Bogra and firmed in by 0500 hours, when a squadron of T-55 with five tanks arrived to inform the commanding officer, about the orders from the brigade commander.

The brigade's plan to capture Bogra city involved our battalion's attack from the north to capture the city up to the railway line. We had the T-55 tanks supporting us. The south western quarter of the city, south of the railway line, was to be captured by 5/11GR advancing from the west, while 6 Guards was to proceed with the 69 Armoured Regiment, less a squadron, from the east to secure the south eastern quarter of the city, from the south. The city was to be captured by last light of 14 December.

The battalion was to commence advance from Mile 4 at 0800 hours on 14 December. As far as the information about the enemy was concerned, we were told that there were hardly any enemy troops left in Bogra. The 6 Guards advanced at night and were expected to be in position south of Bogra, before we commenced our advance. We advanced without any opposition up to Mile 2, with B and C Companies leading the way. Both these companies were to capture Bogra city up to the railway line, while the other two companies were in reserve. A troop of the T-55 tanks followed the leading companies. At Mile 2, we came under heavy small arms and extremely accurate artillery fire.

We had entered the cantonment area, which contained the Headquarters of 16 Infantry Division, the 8 Baluch Officers Mess, EME workshop, the radio station and the Bogra Ammunition Depot. We started house-to-house clearing of the area. It was rather difficult to maintain command and control in the built up area. I did not have a single radio set in the company. In fact, there were only three sets in the whole battalion. I had to use my runner and move about between platoons giving orders and directing them. The enemy brought down very effective artillery fire on the leading companies. I suspected that an artillery observation post was located in one of the high

buildings and tried my hand with a 57mm RCL gun. I fired two rounds without scratching the building. By 1030 hours, we had cleared the area up to 600 yards north of a culvert, when an enemy Chaffee tank, located behind an improvised roadblock made up of felled trees and furniture fired its main gun and MMG at us. The Chaffe was engaged by our own artillery and an outflanking move by B Company forced the enemy tank to withdraw 100 yards south of the culvert. Regrettably, our tanks failed to engage the enemy tank.

When our own troops advanced further towards the culvert, the enemy tank once again engaged us along with a couple of MMGs from south of the culvert. The tank withdrew into the city only after being surprised, when engaged by a section and a 3.5 inch RCL sent on an outflanking movement. On seeing the enemy tank withdraw, we rushed across the culvert and secured a foothold astride the road north of the culvert.

The enemy artillery shelling increased in intensity and accuracy. After a great deal of scrutiny, we spotted the enemy artillery observation post, which was well camouflaged and located on top of a 150 foot- high concrete water tower. As our MMGs were ineffective, the tanks, for the first time, came to our rescue. One of them fired its gun and the 100mm shot left a gaping hole in the tower through which water kept sheeting down for the next two hours. The artillery observation post withdrew immediately.

The main city of Bogra is like any other big city in India. However, it was now deserted, with the exception of a few pariah dogs and a bus which was transporting dead bodies. All the shops were closed and each shop had a number of big padlocks. Apart from the main street, there were a few side streets leading nowhere, most of them were dead ends. There was no place to manoeuvre. With no air, photographs or city plans available and with only one map in the company, it was really difficult to operate. After reconnaissance to the left and right, when no other approach to the city could be found, the commander of B Company and I decided to advance along the road, on the right and the left side respectively.

We advanced into the main city firing LMGs from the hip, with the tanks following us. We had barely advanced a 100 yards into the city, when

the same Chaffee tank held us up for the third time firing from a bend in the road, and there was sniping from all directions. We got our own T-55 tank to come up and engage the enemy tank. However, when our tank moved up, the enemy fired its main gun, when it sighted the tip of the T-55's turret coming around. Our tank withdrew a 100 yards. We persuaded our tank to come up once again and it met with the same result. Even after its third try our tank could not push forward at all! In the process, we were delayed by an hour. Thirty minutes later, we managed to find a by lane to the right, and sent a 3.5 inch RL detachment with a section to outflank the tank from the right. The enemy had taken care to cover the only approach available and engaged the RL detachment, totally wiping it out. The the enemy tank sensing the danger, withdrew into the heart of the city.

We continued clearing the buildings on either side of the main road up to the railway line. At 1600 hours, the enemy blew up the railway bridge to the east to prevent any further build-up. By 1645 hours both B and C Companies had secured their objectives up to the railway line. We were ordered to firm in and dig down. But it was impossible to dig down in the main street of the city, it was all concrete. The remaining structures were all buildings with their doors locked. I decided to break open the locks of all the big buildings and take up positions there. We entered the buildings, sighted the LMGs on the top floors, as well as on the ground floors and thus covered the side lanes and the main road. As no digging was possible on the road, we made use of gunny sacks full of rice, atta, and dal to construct small waist-high protective walls called, sangars.

We captured a number of prisoners, who informed us that the 205 Infantry Brigade consisting of 32 Baluch, 8 Baluch and 4(FI) was opposing us in Bogra city.

The 6 Guards and 69 Armoured Regiment, less a squadron, who were to have secured Bogra city south of the railway line, up to last light, were unable to enter the city and effect a link up with us. Our own tanks withdrew north of the culvert, at sunset and harboured for the night, with A Company providing them protection.

Enemy activity was now restricted to intermittent shelling of B and C Companies and firing on our patrols during the night. On 15 December, while 6 Guards with 69 Armoured Regiment, less a squadron and the 5/11 GR were pressing from the south and southwest, the A and D Companies of my battalion continued to mop up the city, north of the railway line. During the operation, a number of enemies were killed and one JCO and 25 ORs of 4FF were captured. We also suffered a few killed and wounded.

On the evening of 15 December, the battalion was asked by Brigade Headquarters to relieve 5/11GR, which could not make any headway from the south towards the Bogra market. At 1600 hours, B Company advanced under cover of MMG fire from C Company, which also engaged the enemy with artillery fire. In the action that followed, B Company managed to clear the area of the police station and advanced up to the road cross, suffering three casualties. However, no further progress was possible because of very precise MMG and LMG fire at the crossroad area from the heavily fortified built up positions. Realising that the enemy was holding the market place and the post and telegraph area in strength, B Company was withdrawn north of the railway line.



Major General Nazar Hussain Shah, GOC 16 Infantry Division, Pakistan Army, surrendering his weapon to General Lachhman Singh Lehl, GOC, 20 Infantry Division, Indian Army.



Pakistani weapons captured after the battle of Bogra.

The following morning, according to plan, those three areas were heavily shelled from 0400 hours to 0500 hours with all available artillery. From 0500 hours onwards, our psychological warfare campaign began. Announcements were made over a public address system advising the enemy to surrender. The announcements were made in English for the benefit of the officers and in Punjabi and Hindi for the other ranks. The enemy having been demoralised by heavy artillery shelling was subjected to propaganda broadcasts to surrender by 0600 hours or face certain death by over a100 tanks and air strikes with napalm bombs, all of which was not true, of course. From 0500 hours onwards, not a shot was fired by our troops.

At 0545 hours, the enemy responded. Major Raza, the 2iC of 32 Baluch and nephew of Major General Rao Farman Ali, adviser to the then Governor of East Pakistan, and Subedar Sarkar of the 205 Infantry Brigade Signal Company was the first one to surrender to me. Later, Major Raza

gave me the first-hand account of his side of the Battle of Pirganj, where his commanding officer was killed. I managed to persuade him to speak to his men on the public address system and ask them to surrender to avoid being massacred. Gradually, more and more enemy soldiers came forward and surrendered, first in twos and threes, then in sections, and then complete platoons came together and laid down their arms.



Officers of 2/5 GR (FF) with a captured Pakistani tank.

By 1400 hours, 46 officers, 54 JCOs, 1,538 other ranks, eight Razakars and 49 NCEs and four Punjab Police personnel surrendered, and the captured cache of weapons included 79 LMGs, 1,030 Rifles, and 258 sten guns.

Our own battalion casualties during the battle were seven killed and 12 wounded, including one JCO.

A Sequel to the Battle of Pirganj

Earlier in this story there was a mention of Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood, commanding officer of 32 Baluch, who had led his battalion from the front in the counter-attack on our defensive position at the battle of Pirganj and was subsequently killed just a few yards ahead of our forward most trenches. We acknowledged his courage as a brave warrior of the Pakistan Army, in the traditions of our own warrior code and his story was widely reported by the Indian Press.



Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood remains a brave warrior of 1971.

Sometime later, I came across a blog by a retired Pakistani officer, Major Agha Amin, Armoured Corps, who was a family friend of the Mahmoods. In his blog, he mentioned that Colonel Mahmood's son, Nauman Mahmood had joined 22 Baluch, his father's original unit. He also wrote that Colonel Sultan Mahmood's body was never found and that this caused deep anguish to his family. The blog said that Nauman is now a brigadier in the Pakistan Army and was posted at the Pakistan Staff College in Quetta.

I felt that it was my duty, in the true tradition of the 'Warrior Code', that I should write to his son to tell him that his father was laid to rest in accordance with the Muslim rites and also indicated where he was buried.

My letter to his son is reproduced below.

Col Itbar Singh (Retd)
House No.49 Sector 54
Mohali
Punjab-160055
India
23Apr 2012

My dear Brigadier,

Please refer to Blog by Major Agha.H.Amin (Retd) dated 23 Dec 2011 on Google.

I write to you as one soldier to another. I would have written to you earlier but for want of address. We as soldiers know very well that a lot of Myths are created by both sides in a conflict after the war or battle. I however do not believe in it. The truth must prevail. For instance there was no pitch dark night of 07/08 Dec 1971. By checking the phase of the moon on that day it will be quite clear.

I would like to assure you, and through you, to your brother and sister that your brave father Lt Col Raja Sultan Mahmud died while leading his troops from the front. He died hardly 5 yards from our forward trenches when shot through his chest by a burst of MMG fire. 32 Baluch did make valiant attempts to retrieve the body of their fallen Commanding Officer but in vain. In the process they suffered heavy casualties. I got the body of your father and two Other Ranks of 32 Baluch buried by the local Muslims of Pirganj the next day as per Muslim religious rites. They lie buried astride the road in area Mile 26 South of Pirganj. There are marshes on either side of the road South of Pirganj which are connected by water channel which flows through a culvert on the road. Your father's body lies buried approximately 500 yards South of this culvert and East of the road.

I was Company Commander with 2/5GR(FF) and was with the forward Platoon which was under attack by 32 Baluch on the night of 07/08 Dec 1971. I feel 32 Baluch lost the will to fight on the morning of 08 Dec 1971 after having lost their Commanding Officer and having suffered very heavy casualties the previous night.

I think that every soldier who has been a witness to the martyrdom of another soldier, no matter which side of the conflict he belongs to, has a duty to the family of the fallen warrior to intimate to them the circumstances of his demise. I have tried to fulfil that duty by writing this letter.

My grandfather Subedar Vir Singh and my father Brigadier Apar Singh MBE served with 59 Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force) and 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles respectively. My son Lt Col Himmat Singh Aulakh is the forth generation PIFFER officer having joined 2/5GR(FF) after me. Incidentally my father graduated from Staff College Quetta where you are the Chief Instructor at present.

With regards

Col Itbar Singh (Retd)

Brig.Nauman Mahmood
Chief Instructor.
Command and Staff College
Quetta
Pakistan

PS:I am not sure if you will receive this letter. I will be looking for the acknowledgement.

I did not get any acknowledgement from Brig Nauman Mahmood for over a month, I therefore sent him a copy of my letter through my brother, Air Cdr Manbir Singh, Vir Chakra, VM, who was then in Canada. My brother managed to send it via email to Staff College, Quetta.

The reply my brother received is produced below:

Date: Thu, 31 May 2012 01:59:29 -0400

Subject: Re: FW: Information about Lt Col Raja Sultan Mahmood
From: oicnet@armystaffcollege.gov.pk
To: manbir90@hotmail.com

Dear Sir,

Your E-mail has been received and forwarded to the concerned personal.

We

highly appreciate your effort in this regard.

You will be contacted soon if any further assistance is required.

Best Regards

A Blog Post by Pakistan Officer

Indo-Pak Military History

Friday, December 23, 2011

Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood Shaheed

My personal association with him goes back to 1969 while my father's personal association with him goes back to 1949 when he was my father's class fellow at the Gordon College, Rawalpindi.

I met him for the first time when he was brigade major of 1 AK Brigade at Muzaffarabad in 1969 while my father was commanding a field engineer company at Chehla Bandi in Neelum Valley. In the same year, my father was posted as GSO 2 Operations, 16 Division, Quetta. Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmud joined us in Quetta in late 1970 as CO 22 Baluch. In March 1971 16 Division moved to East Pakistan in a record time of six days. The GSO 1 Colonel Ghulam Dastagir was wisely left behind by the thoughtful GOC Nazar Hussain Shah since he was a Bengali. Both my father and Colonel Sultan moved to East Pakistan. In September 1971, my father was promoted to command 6 Engineer Battalion, which was moved back to West Pakistan

in October 1971 to lay the famous triple layer minefield of Shakargarh Bulge.

Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmud went missing in December 1971 and it was only later that we learnt that he had been killed in action.

His son Imran was my class fellow and good friend at Muzaffarabad, Quetta, and later Pindi where his family settled after the war. Our association with the family was deep and continuous from 1969 till to date and my father made it a point that we visited them twice or thrice a week all the time that we were in Pindi and later in Islamabad. The gap that was left with his absence was dark and sad. It is difficult to describe the depression that dominates the family of a man who was killed in action and whose body was never found.

Originally commanding 22 Baluch, Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood Shaheed, relinquished command over a matter of professional disagreement with his GOC in East Pakistan.

He was then re-assigned to command 32 Baluch.

He ran into an Indian ambush while leading 32 Baluch in a pitch-dark night. Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood Shaheed embraced martyrdom with many bullets in his chest while 32 Baluch fled the battlefield abandoning their brave commanding officers body, which was never recovered.

Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood Shaheed's gallantry was acknowledged by the opposing Indian commanders and acknowledged in Indian newspapers.

He is survived by two sons and a daughter. His younger son Brigadier Nauman Mahmood ably commanded a brigade in FATA in action and is now Chief Instructor at the Command and Staff College, Quetta.

Nauman joined 22 Baluch his father's real battalion and not 32 Baluch.

His younger brother Brigadier Raja Aftab rose to brigadier rank and is an outstanding gentleman.

May Allah bless the brave soul of Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sultan Mahmood Shaheed

Major Agha. H. Amin (Retired), Armoured Corps.

By Indian Press on His Heroic Martyrdom

THE HINDU

During the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), one intrepid Pakistani officer leading a bayonet charge into the guts of 2/5 GR (FF), was slashed with a kukri by an equally brave officer Capt Jatandar Nath Sood. The Pakistani officer's body and identity was completely smeared with blood and he was mistaken for Brig Tajjmal Hussain Malik, comd of 205 Pakistan Infantry Brigade. It was at his funeral that the documents found with him as well as his blood soaked epaulettes correctly identified him as PA-4863 Lt Col Raja Sultan Mahmood, CO of Baluch Regiment as his body was lowered into the grave, one Gorkha JCO threw in Sultan's badges of rank, looked up towards the heaven and muttered, 'Let him also know this Sultan Bahadur was a lieutenant colonel. Raja Sultan Mahmood is called by all friends and foes as 'Sultan of lieutenant colonels'.

INFILTRATING BEHIND THE ENEMY

THE BATTLE OF HILLI

BRIGADIER V.R. SWAMINATHAN

After successfully engaging the Pakistanis at the Baura Salient, we concentrated at our Forward Concentration Area, short of the main battle area.

The battle for the capture of Hilli started on 23 November 1971. Another battalion of the brigade had launched an attack on the main defences and consolidated their position by 25 November. We did not know about the beginning or the outcome of the battle, other than hearing the sands of intense firing. There had been no conference of the three battalion commanders and the artillery and armour commanders for the issue of formal orders.

On the evening of 25 November, I was told to build up on Morapara, one of the objectives that had been captured by the previous battalion and to occupy it by night, with my battalion 22 Maratha LI (Hyderabad) (less two companies) and to relieve the previous unit. By about 9 p.m., the objective was occupied. I deployed B company under Major Dadkar, to face the enemy to the East and C Company under Major Chandrasekharan, facing North. I sent a platoon of Dadkar's company under Lieutenant Tombing, to a feature about 500 yards ahead to the East, as a screen position, with

adequate firepower. All these activities were completed during the night, with no further briefing or information. After some adjustments, the men dug in and occupied their defences. There was a hut like structure at the forward position with peepholes, in which I mounted a medium machine gun (MMG). Captain Suresh Murthy, the regimental medical officer, joined me, and established his regimental aid post (RAP), on my orders. I had my subedar major with me.

On 26 November, just as dawn was breaking, there was a loud explosion in front of Dadkar's company, and we found that one of our JCOs from the screen platoon Naib Subedar Mohamad Ismail had his leg blown off, after he stepped on an anti-personnel mine. Immediately, Dadkar with a medical orderly went ahead to retrieve the gravely wounded JCO. At the same time, we saw a number of soldiers moving towards us, and I thought that these were personnel from the screen platoon. However, the leading soldier coming towards us opened fire and unmindful of his personal safety, Dadkar moved towards the JCO to rescue him. The fire from the advancing party killed Dadkar and the medical orderly. Dadkar was awarded the Vir Chakra for this selfless act of bravery. Then, I knew that these were Pakistanis and since we were already at Stand To, opened fire with all our weapons and killed not only the leading soldier who killed Dadkar, but also the remainder of the enemy, who were following behind. We held fire until the enemy was close enough and then opened up with full force killing the entire lot. More Pakistanis followed and they too were mowed down. By that time, it was full day light and we could pin point and eliminate the advancing soldiers.

The screen platoon played a vital role and fired at the enemy at his rear, as well as also at those who were retreating. Despite these reverses, the enemy kept coming at us, now supported by tanks. The MMG that I had mounted in the hut played a very useful role. The enemy had in the meantime, mounted a .50 MG, at Twin Trees north of our post. The gun had been mounted between the joint base of the trees. One of the bursts from the .50 unfortunately hit my MMG gunner, just below his helmet and killed him instantly. So, for a while I was without MMG fire support. My enterprising

subedar major, a trained MMG gunner volunteered and took up the gunner's position.

I desperately wanted to get rid of the enemy machine gun that was beginning to create quite a few problems. I sent for my RCL gun expert, Naib Subedar Shivram Killedar and indicated the position, where he should take his gun and destroy the MMG. He had a better place in mind and so I left it to him. By making use of the embankment, he took his RCL and after ranging, with his first shot he took on the enemy. We saw the enemy MMG and its crew flying high!

I saw that we were on the eastern side of the railway embankment and we could move more easily on the western side with caution. The tracks of the old railway line running via Hilli had been removed.

The brigade commander was pleased with the existing situation and kept telling me to consolidate my position. I was running low on ammunition, and so I requested the commander to send me more. He managed to round up some men and sent me the ammunition including bullets for the MMG. The battle raged almost until 1p.m. Since my boys had been battle hardened from an experience at the Baura Salient, they took it well. We suffered a few casualties but thanks to immediate treatment many were saved.

Withdrawal of the Screen

All this time, as the battle raged on, the injured Naib Subedar Mohamad Ismail remained where he fell injured. After the enemy was somewhat silenced, we managed to rescue the JCO and had him attended to by our medical personnel. The screen platoon, after doing a magnificent job was still to be pulled back. So I laid a smoke screen and sent a protection party under Major. I.M. Sharma, to cover the withdrawal of the platoon which eventually returned safely. For his devotion to duty, Lieutenant Tombing was awarded a Mention in Despatches.

After we had successfully beaten the deliberate counter attack, we concluded that the enemy on seeing the previous unit leaving and joining their main force at Hilli, perhaps thought that we had left Morapara vacant!

So they marched in, assuming that they would occupy our positions and pose problems for those at Hilli. They paid dearly for their miscalculation!

Two of my companies joined me later in the day and we were too cramped for space in that small village. To thwart any surprises from the enemy and to protect my northern flank, I sent patrols and ambush parties, both by day and night. These were led by either an officer or a JCO. One such patrol led by Naib Subedar Jameel Ahmed, met with success when they saw a Pakistani patrol of about 10 soldiers coming towards us. The JCO immediately laid an ambush and was able to wipe out the entire patrol. For this exemplary act of courage, he was awarded a Sena Medal. During one of the actions by the enemy, Captain Madappa was injured and had to be evacuated. This meant that now I had no officers left who could lead both A and B companies as company commanders.

Lull in the Battle

By now the men were properly dug in and they usually made tea inside their trenches. One day, a very able and upcoming NCO, Naik Jagannath Powar, was making tea his trench when an enemy shell, either from an RCL or a tank, hit a tree near the trench, ricocheted and burst inside their trench killing all the three men.

On or about the 6-7 of December, we had a conference at the Brigade HQ at which all commanding officers were present as well as another brigade commander. To my surprise, I learnt that our commander would be moving out to head an ad-hoc brigade, being raised elsewhere and that a new commander would be taking over. It was shocking news to all of us, but more was to come. The new commander, in his address said that he would be commanding a large area in the rear, and hence was putting me in charge to look after the front with four battalions since I was the senior most officer. The commander himself would be stationed in the rear, which was miles behind the frontlines.

Battle of Hilli

Our brigade commander had not yet moved and so I met him on the morning of 9 December. By then, reports were coming in that the Americans were likely to intervene and that we needed to finish the war early.

I informed my commander what the other brigadier had told us. My superior stated that since there was little activity on our front it was decided to move him to meet a new need. It was at this stage that I volunteered to break the inactivity and revealed my plan to infiltrate behind the enemy and launch an attack from his rear. The commander was quite apprehensive about my plan and said that such tactics worked only in books and sand models, they were not practical. Besides, no one had ever heard of such a bold plan being executed with success anywhere. I assured him that my men had been well trained for such actions, and that I was confident my success. With great reluctance he agreed to my scheme. Then, after outlining my plan to my neighbouring CO, I requested him to give me covering fire when the battle started and to engage the enemy south of Bisapara, which was one of my objectives.

Having finalized my strategy, I gave out my orders by 3 p.m. I also drew the plan on the ground and explained the details as to how I wanted it to be executed. As I was explaining, one of my NCOs suddenly jumped and pulled me down to protect me from an enemy gun that was ranging and using his auxiliary gun to target us. Thereafter, the enemy fired his main gun and hit some other target far away.

We also now had a new Artillery Battery Commander, whose battery had been placed in direct support. I could not understand how and why at this stage of the battle a supporting arm would be changed.

Meticulous preparations were made, the men were briefed, and I visited the companies. Bisapara, Bara Chhengram and some other villages formed part of the Hilli complex. The men were motivated and raring to go. Their equipment was thoroughly checked to ensure that they did not make any noise during movement, especially while crouching or sitting down. Major Rai was made in charge of the base at Morapara, along with my subedar major, who would be required to receive the casualties. I had arranged for

extra ammunition to be kept ready to be moved by the men of B Company when required. Before setting out, I alerted my neighbouring battalion commander. Everything was ready and the most critically important event of my battalion was about to unfold.

At exactly 8 p.m., A Company started moving forward, followed by all the others in their respective formations. As arranged, the men halted and squatted after every twenty-five yards and observed enemy activity. Thus, we progressed without any interference from the Pakistanis. At halts, I used to move around slowly and encourage the men. At one such meeting, I saw one of them cough very slightly and trying to control it. I found it was Subedar D.B. Powar, one of my outstanding JCOs and a potential subedar major of the unit. He was running a high fever, and had yet come for the operation. Similarly, Major Patil of D Company too had running a temperature.

Though the distance to be covered was short, due to our calculated and deliberate slow stop and start movement A Company succeeded in infiltrating and going behind the enemy lines by about 9.15 p.m. The company pushed to a distance of approximately fifty to seventy-five yards, behind the enemy, swing round and succeeded in securing and marking the Forming Up Place (FUP) for the attack. The time now was 9.30 p.m., and on a pre-arranged signal, I moved forward and established myself at the FUP with the RMO and his RAP. Thereafter, on my signal, both C and D Companies moved forward, changed direction, and successfully occupied their respective assault positions. Till that time, there had been no sign of any enemy activity. At 10 p.m., on my signal, both C and D. Companies moved forward for the assault. As per plan, C Company reached their objective, Bisapara, without any hitch, since there were very few Pakistanis who were easily over powered. However, in the case of D Company, they met with stiff opposition. As the company began its assault they almost succeeded in capturing their objective, Bara Chhengram easily. But one of my machine gunners who was carrying an ammunition box, unfortunately tripped over a fallen branch of a tree and fell, dropping the ammunition box with a loud clatter. This woke up the enemy, who began firing to his front

since all the weapons were directed there. They never expected the assault to come from the rear. By then it was no longer a stealthy attack. By now fully awake the Pakistanis fired with all their weapons, including artillery and possibly a machine gun from a tank. We suffered a large number of casualties, one of whom was Subedar D.B. Powar. The presence of the doctor at the forward lines was immensely valuable and he was able to save quite a few lives.

A young Officer, Second Lieutenant A.B. Nanavathy, had just been posted and joined the unit, soon after the enemy counterattack at Morapara. He was posted to T Company. This young officer went into action along with his company and was severely injured in the early stages of the battle. Bullet had hit his chest and narrowly missed hitting his heart.

In spite of being caught unawares and fighting a losing battle, one of the Pakistani soldiers fought valiantly, firing from a trench and inflicting casualties on us. One of my NCOs, Naik Yellappa Yellurkar, of D Company went into a trench, chasing him from trench to trench, unmindful of his personal safety and was able to kill him. Later, it was learnt, that he was the Company Commander of C Company, and his name was Abdul Halem. A number of operational documents were recovered from the trench. All this while, Patil was fighting a tough battle against some of the enemy still holding on to their posts, but with good leadership and overwhelming firepower, we overcame all the opposition. Eleven Pakistani soldiers were also captured.

The effective fire from the neighbouring battalion, as pre-arranged, also helped and prevented the enemy from sending any reinforcements as the battle progressed. By this time, Chandran was also in a secure position to prevent any reinforcement coming in from the south. Patil's company, consolidated their position and eliminated any remnants of the enemy. Later, it was learnt from the prisoners that the enemy had initially occupied both Bisapara and Bara Chhengram however the men were moved to Bara Chhengram during the night, leaving very few men at Bisapara. That is why Chandran found little opposition there. The fighting however raged until the early hours of the morning of 10 December.

Due to the presence of enemy tanks and expecting a possible counter-attack, I ordered the armoured troop assigned to me to move forward. Captain Brid, one of my officers, had gone to fetch the tank, but the troop commander was extremely reluctant to move fearing that there may be anti-tank mines enroute. Ultimately, the tanks and our RCL guns were brought forward and we were ready for whatever was in store for us. The Brigade Commander was very happy and congratulated me on our successful infiltration and asked me to consolidate my position.

Soon after dawn, I went around the companies, congratulating them on their achievement. The men were in high spirits and delighted with the outcome. Thereafter, I met the Pakistani prisoners.

Sitting on a fallen log, I had their blindfolds and hands loosened. I offered them a cup of tea and allowed them to smoke. The prisoners were surprised at the treatment meted out to them. They had been brainwashed that Indians would treat POWs badly and that they were poor fighters. Then their havildar asked for permission to speak. He told us about the brainwashing. He then said that he was surprised that the CO of the unit that had defeated and captured them, would be speaking to them so freely. This was unimaginable in their army, since they hardly ever met their own CO. He also told us about the Bisapara platoon being moved during the night. He confirmed that those sentries were there, but they did not detect our night time move through their territory. He also mentioned that if only they had officers like us to lead them, then they would be the best army. I then sent them to the Brigade HQ for further disposal.

Thereafter, it was seen that the enemy was vacating his positions, since his flanks were already exposed and he could no longer hold on to his positions.

On 11 December another battalion was sent forward to pursue the enemy. Our brigade then began its advance along the main road toward the East. I was pulled back on the 12 and followed the advancing column. On the 14, the Battalion reached Mitapukhur, a small town on the road to Rangpur. We had a break for the day and earned a well-deserved rest.

BRIGADIER TOM PANDE, MAHA VIR CHAKRA (MVC)

GENERAL DEEPAK KAPOOR, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM

I was a captain with three years' service, and was posted as GSO3 in HQ 2 Mountain Artillery Brigade, at Lekhapani, just short of the Indo-Myanmar border. Brigadier K.P. Pande, more popularly known as Tom Pande, possibly because of his short height, commanded the artillery brigade. However, what he lacked in height, he more than amply made up for in sheer dynamism. Forceful and upright, he was a professionally competent gunner, whose reputation for flamboyance and verve preceded him. I had received him at Guwahati, in the beginning of 1970, when he was posted in as the Commander. In the year that we served together, he had made a permanent mark on the units under his command, as well as his staff.

The atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army, on the people of East Pakistan resulted in millions fleeing and crossing the international border (IB) to India, where refugee camps were established for them. The birth of the Mukti Bahini was a spontaneous reaction of Bangladeshis to avenge Pakistani atrocities and liberate their land. The Mukti Bahini was fully supported by the Indian Army, resulting in skirmishes all along the India-East Pakistan border.

61 Mountain Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Shiv Yadav, was deployed in Kalashahr to assist Mukti Bahini operations. In July 1971, Brigadier Pande with selected staff was directed to move to this area to

provide artillery advice and support to the operations of 61 Mountain Brigade.

The Dhalai Battle

The Dhalai battle had started as a minor skirmish, when the Mukti Bahini attacked the Pakistani post at Dhalai tea estate, on 28 October 1971. Over the next two days, a rapid escalation of the fighting resulted in Pakistan's 14 Infantry Division deploying a full brigade in the area, with one infantry battalion specifically defending the Dhalai Tea Garden. From the Indian side, the task of capturing this prestigious post was given to 61 Mountain Brigade.

The 61 Mountain Brigade had 2 Jat, 7 Raj Rif and 14 Guards under command. Subsequently, 14 Guards was replaced by 12 Kumaon. On 29 October 1971, 2 Jat was tasked with the capture of forward company position of the enemy. Since its initial attacks were not successful, it was directed to re-launch the attack the next night. However, despite its best efforts, at the cost of a long number of casualties, it could not succeed. During the course of this intense fight, the commander, Brigadier Shiv Yadav, was also a casualty. Early next morning, the corps commander, General Sagat Singh, visited the brigade and asked Brigadier Pande to take over as commander of 61 Mountain Brigade and to continue to attack on the position.

The Commander tasked 7 Raj Rif to carry out the attack that night. It was in the midst of that attack, on 1 November 1971, that I joined Brigadier Pande in the FUP of 7 Raj Rif.

The attack was launched as planned and saw some intense hand-to-hand fighting. Finally, after suffering very heavy casualties, Major Punia's company won the day for 7 Raj Rif and by 0100 hours, the next morning, Phase-1 objectives of the battalion had been captured. However, within an hour and a half, the Pakistan army launched a counterattack with a battalion, which engulfed the tactical headquarters of 61 Mountain Brigade, besides other localities. The sight of the brigade commander firing an LMG,

alongside the rest of us, to ward off the counter attack was thrilling as well as encouraging!

Finally, the counter attack was beaten back with heavy casualties to the enemy, and 7 Raj Rif continued with the remaining phases of the mission, making slow but steady progress. By 0800 hours, they had captured their objective, though at heavy cost. In the process, we lost Major Khatri, the light battery commander, who had the courage to call for fire on his own position. Major Punia of 7 Raj Rif was awarded the Vir Chakra for his bravery.

Prior to commencement of the war on 3 December 1971, this was the biggest battle between the two sides, which highlighted the invincibility of the Indian Army and literally broke the will of the Pakistan Army, deployed in East Pakistan. In view of the operations, Brigadier Tom Pande was recommended for a Mahavir Chakra, and directed to continue command of the brigade. It is a rare honour for an artillery brigade commander to be appointed, as an infantry brigade commander, in the middle of a battle. What is more creditable is that he performed admirably, in the process getting confirmed as the Commander and being recommended for a high award.

Main Operations of 61 Mountain Brigade

The period between the first week of November to 1 December 1971, was used by the commander to vigorously train his command for the forthcoming operations. He made sure his troops were prepared for all likely contingencies-sand model discussions, mobilisation practices, and rehearsals were intensively carried out to be fully prepared, when the balloon went up.

So great was the corps commander, General Sagat Singh's confidence in Tom Pande, after the Dhalai battle that, he detached 61 Mountain Brigade, from 57 Mountain Division and launched it as an independent force for the main operations. In retrospect, it would be appropriate to say that his

confidence was well-placed and the brigade delivered results out of proportion with the force used.

Advance to Daudkhandi

When Pakistan launched pre-emptive air strikes on Indian air bases, on 3 December 1971, 4 Corps was totally ready to launch operations into East Pakistan from the eastern side. 4 Corps had tasked 8 Mountain Division, under Major General Krishna Rao, to launch operations towards Sylhet. Simultaneously, 57 Mountain Division, under General Ben Gonsalves, was to cross the Meghna river, at Akhaura, and 23 Mountain Division, under General Rocky Hira, was to attack enemy positions at Feni.

The 61 Mountain Brigade, placed between 57 Mountain Division to the north and 23 Mountain Division to the south was chosen for the task of bypassing the formidable enemy defences at Comilla, from the north and capturing Chandina, which lay on the strategically crucial Comilla-Daudkhandi-Narayanganj-Dhaka axis. The brigade was to block enemy withdrawal from Comilla towards Dhaka, by holding Chandina strongly and to attack the Comilla defences from the rear. Simultaneously, it was tasked to advance to Daudkhandi, cross the Meghna River, and capture Narayanganj. Thus, 61 Mountain Brigade had been tasked more heavily than some of the divisions under 4 Corps.

I had the privilege of accompanying the brigade advance into East Pakistan, towards Burichang, on the night of 3 December, in a troop of tanks, along with a company of 12 Kumaon. The mission was successful and Burichang was captured by 2230 hours. 12 Kumaon had to face some heavy fighting, in Chandina, but it finally fell by 0330 hours. The brigade commander also arrived, at Chandina, accompanied by Commanding Officer 23 Mountain Regiment, the direct support artillery regiment of the brigade.

Daudkhandi was secured by the evening, much to the delight of the corps commander, who paid us a helicopter visit. The speed of 61 Mountain

Brigade operations, totally unhinged the enemy and Brigadier Tom Pande was recommended for a Mahavir Chakra, for the second time.

Rather than making a dash for Dhaka, at this stage, the corps commander decided that both 57 Mountain Division and 23 Mountain Division should catch up, before making a simultaneous push towards the capital, from the east. Meanwhile, 61 Mountain Brigade was directed to attack the formidable Comilla defences, from the west.

The lightning speed of 61 Mountain Brigade operations made the task of 23 Mountain Division, advancing towards Feni much easier. Pakistan Army's 53 Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Aslam Khan, had created a formidable defence at Feni and was fully prepared to face any Indian onslaught. The capture of Chandina, by 61 Mountain Brigade, convinced Brigadier Aslam that the brigade was part of 23 Mountain Division and the rest of the division was heading for Laksham, to the north of Feni. Therefore, he gave orders to vacate the defences at Feni and to occupy a defended sector, at Laksham. However, by the time his brigade arrived at Laksham, it had already been captured by elements of 23 Mountain Division. When they realised their folly, they tried to fall back to Feni, only to discover that Feni too had fallen by then.

Thus, it came to pass that on 10 December 1971, a demoralised, disintegrated and hounded 53 Pakistan Infantry Brigade, led by Brigadier Aslam Khan, looking for the Indian Army, to surrender. Fearful of being lynched by the Mukti Bahini and the enraged civil population, for all the atrocities they had committed, they wanted to ensure their personal safety by surrendering to the Indian Army. At about 0930 hours in the morning, they accosted a sentry of 61 Mountain Brigade HQ, near Chandina, to say that they wished to surrender. The sentry conveyed the message to the Brigade Major, adding there were around 1500 fully armed Pakistani officers and men. We, at the brigade HQ, were a bit concerned that if the Pakistanis realised that we were only about 50 men to whom they were surrendering, they might just decide to physically overpower us and claim a victory of sorts.

Quickly, a plan was devised by Brigadier Pande to masquerade as GOC of the division, and at 1100 hours, a convoy of five vehicles including a rover and protection party drove into the area, where the Pakistanis led by their brigade commander, were waiting. The charade of Brigadier Aslam surrendering to the GOC was played out and the brigade commander, 28 officers, and about 1,650 Pakistani soldiers were ordered to deposit their weapons, along with ammunition in a makeshift armoury. Brigadier Aslam was a broken man, who kept begging to be saved from the Bangladeshis.

Advance towards Dhaka

Meanwhile, on the morning of 13 December, 12 Kumaon commenced their operation by crossing the formidable Meghna. Using the solitary functioning ferry and a host of rapidly collected local fishing boats, the bulk of the battalion crossed through and captured Narayanganj, without much resistance.

The way to Dhaka now lay clear. In this short span of 10 days, 61 Mountain Brigade had done wonders under a dynamic commander and created history.

Surrender at Comilla

The preparations for an attack on Comilla, by 61 Mountain Brigade started in right earnest, from 11 December. Major attacks were launched by 7 Raj Rif on the night of 13-14 December, but these were only partially successful. A two battalion attack was planned for 15 December, when news poured in that General Niazi, the Commander-in-Chief of all Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, had decided to surrender to the Indian Army on the 16 December morning, at Dhaka. With that news, the resistance of Comilla garrison crumbled and Brigadier Atif, the Comilla Garrison Commander, who was an Olympian hockey player and President of Pakistan's Hockey Federation, prepared for surrender, at Comilla stadium, the next morning.

The formal surrender of the Comilla garrison, led by Brigadier Atif, took place at 1000 hours, on the morning of 16 December, at the stadium.

Recognising Brigadier Pande's contribution, the corps commander specifically tasked him to take the surrender. The humiliation and dejection was writ large on the faces of the Pakistani soldiers, as the ceremony progressed. Incidentally, Brigadier Pande was recommended for a Mahavir Chakra for the third time, on 16 December. Ultimately, the government combined all three recommendations and awarded a Mahavir Chakra to this great soldier.

By the afternoon of 16 December, the brigade was on its way to Dhaka and the advance elements of the Brigade HQ arrived there, at 1900 hours and occupied a vacant bungalow in Dhanmandi, an affluent area of Dhaka.

Aftermath

On creation of Bangladesh, while the rest of the Indian Army withdrew from Bangladesh, the only formation which was asked to stay back, was 61 Mountain Brigade Group, under Brigadier Tom Pande. It was placed at the disposal of the newly created government of Bangladesh, under Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, to stabilise restive areas in the eastern part of the country. A relatively less known fact is that for almost six months, the brigade helped quell uprisings and opposition, in the hill tracts of Chittagong, they suffered a lot of casualties and in the process earned the sobriquet of The Phantom Brigade. Today, these actions of the Phantom Brigade have become the solid foundation on which Indo-Bangladesh relations are thriving.

The adage 'never has so much been achieved by so few in so short a time' can aptly and justifiably be applied to the operations of The Phantom Brigade. Credit must go to Brigadier Tom Pande for transforming the brigade and leading it from the front, to achieve outstanding results, in the service of his nation. His professionalism and soldierly qualities left an indelible mark on all those who met him.

Brigadier Tom Pande passed away on 4 February 2010, while attending the Artillery Reunion, at Deolali. In a way, this is my humble tribute to this great soldier, his professional acumen and his service to the nation.

PART – 3

The War on the Western Front

BATTLE OF GADRA CITY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL SUNHARA SINGH, VRC

Preamble

An eight kilometer track linked Gadra Road railway station with the Pakistani town Gadra, a flourishing trade hub, buzzing with both legal and illegal activities, situated 41 kms east of Munabav, the last Indian railway station; Khokhropar is the first Pakistani station across the border and both stations are of strategic significance.

Shifting sand dunes shaped by the prevailing winds look like waves at sea, but frozen for the time being in the form of long ridges that stretch from west to east. The vegetation is sparse and the climate extreme – very hot in summer, but the nights are pleasant and cool. It is equally cold in winter, with scanty rainfall in between. Landmarks are insubstantial, and exist only near watering holes, thus making navigation difficult. The terrain is excellent for tanks, but a nightmare for wheeled vehicles, consequently logistic support is best provided with camels. The only way to avoid dehydration is to carry out operations between last light and first light, and not to move in the sun.

15 Kumoan

15 Kumaon is an old infantry battalion which originally served the princely state of Indore. Raised in 1730 by the Maratha ruler, Malhar Rao Holkar, the battalion has an incredible record of service in both World Wars, in Baluchistan, Persia and Iraq. In 1953, it was merged with the Kumaon Regiment, and was given its present designation.

Prelude to Operations

After spending over three years in Nagaland, an operational tenure that was as hectic as it was rewarding, the battalion moved to Bhuj in August 1971. 15 Kumaon was given the award of 'Honour Battalion', three times, for its role in eliminating Mowa Angami's insurgency. The battalion deserved a well-earned peace tenure with their families. However, war clouds had started gathering on the horizon, with events in East Pakistan gaining momentum for the liberation of Bangladesh. The battalion had no training in desert warfare. We moved to our firm base at Gadra Road, where we trained in battle drills for impending operation, in the third week of October 1971.

Actual Operations

The battalion was heavily strafed at about 2000 hours. We were preparing for dinner when we received the code word to shift to the assembly area. The move was made in complete secrecy and the enemy appeared to be unaware that we were advancing. Incidentally, our kitchen too had a taste of the strafing and we had to be content with emergency rations. Enemy information was extremely sketchy. We reached the assembly area at around 0400 hours on 4 December 1971 and lay low in our hurriedly dug sand trenches. The Commanding Officer gave verbal orders to his O (Order) group, around noon. I collected my O group, and discussed the entire plan of the operation with them, and tied up all loose ends.

The operation was to be conducted in three phases, and my company was assigned the task of completing Phase 1, in addition to part of the final phase. I collected my men just before the attack for a pep talk and wished

them good hunting. I reminded them about '*Nam, Namak, aur Nishan*'. The battalion proceeded from the assembly area at last light. My Company led the way, along with the intelligence section, headed by Captain Kuldeep Sansanwal. We had some difficulty in locating the boundary pillars that demarcated the international boundary between India and Pakistan. Soon, Phase 1 began and I captured Point 658 and Whale Back by 2100 hours, with feeble resistance, as the enemy fled in confusion, leaving behind their belongings and ammunition.

Since Phase 1 of the attack was accomplished without firing a single bullet, I decided to dispense with the success signal and reported to the commanding officer on the radio. Thereafter, I secured the FUP for B and C Companies, with one of my platoons.

While in the FUP, B Company was fired upon with medium machine guns. Major H.S. Yadav called for artillery fire on the enemy position, and thereafter surprise was lost. The enemy opened up with all their might, but under severe pressure from B and C Companies, they lost their nerve and withdrew to their main positions, codenamed 'Ridge' and 'High Ground'.

In the final phase of our attack, main enemy defences consisting of pill boxes on top of dunes south of Gadra city were to be tackled. D Company and A Company moved behind the enemy defensive position on Gadra Dali road, to launch our assault in its final phase. The enemy resorted to heavy artillery and machine gun fire, which was mercifully, ineffective. While in the FUP, we were fired upon heavily. The reserve platoon of A Company suffered heavy casualties, with many of their men either dead or wounded. The Platoon Commander, Subedar Dharmatma Singh, a Services basketball player, was killed. About 10 medium machine guns and 40 to 50 light machine guns were spewing bullets, with the occasional flamethrower. In this tense situation, I asked my company to rise and fight for '*Nam, Namak, aur Nishan*'. I could hear my men saying, '*Apka naak nicha nahin hone denge.*'

I was waiting for this and I shouted our war cry '*Kalika maiyya ki jai*', while firing from my carbine. It was a sight to behold how the Kumaonis went berserk and assaulted the objective resolutely and speedily, to

minimize casualties. They put their lives at stake. Unfortunately A Company was caught in the maze of this murderous fire and suffered heavy casualties. Our offensive progressed extremely well and we destroyed all the enemy pill boxes in our path. There after a hand-to-hand fight ensued, which went on for well over two hours, as our ammunition was exhausted. Twice, I was pushed to the ground intentionally by none other than my sahayak, Kamlapati – a burly sportsman, to protect me from the splinters of the artillery shells that fell in our vicinity.

How can anyone pay back those intensely loyal warriors? Almost at the fag end of the assault, I saw Lance Naik Durga Dutt running towards the last MMG bunker, which was firing at my party, with a 3.5 inch rocket launcher, a platoon radio set, his rifle, and ill-fitting helmet on his head. He had in his hand, a grenade to tackle the bunker barely yards away from us. I shouted at him, not to endanger his life, since we had almost surrounded the area. But by this time, he had reached the bunker and grabbed hold of the red-hot muzzle of the medium machine gun and in the process was hit by scores of bullets on his face and chest. A shining example of unflinching loyalty and devotion to the cause of his country and regiment!

This was Dutt's third effort with a borrowed grenade. He had already destroyed two bunkers with grenades that were issued to him. We overpowered and captured the entire MMG detachment, along with the detachment commander.

The Ridge was our final objective, which was in fact the backbone of the defences of Gadra City. I fired three green very lights, which was our success signal, at around 7 a.m. Gadra city was captured as the first rays of the rising sun hit the feet of the great Malharis. I informed the commanding officer about our success, and he arrived on the ridge shortly afterwards, accompanied by the brigade commander. We reorganized, regrouped, replenished, refitted, and rested for a while before proceeding in the afternoon to capture our next objective – Dali.

My company captured one jeep, four 3-inch mortars, one 2-inch mortar, two 6-pounder guns, one Vickers MMG, one LMG, 23 rifles, one radio set, thirteen camels, a large quantity of clothing, rations, and three prisoners of

war. There are many imponderables in war, where in the heat of battle many unimaginable things take place, when a leader has to find a quick fix and out-of-the box solutions to achieve immediate success on the objective, without jeopardizing the morale of troops.

How was Victory Achieved?

- The attack was from the rear, which totally surprised and unnerved the enemy.
- The commanding officer himself took the calculated risk of taking recourse to out-flanking manoeuvres to achieve success.
- The battalion trained hard, and evolved battle drills, to fight in the desert at night, on almost identical ground and marched long distances with FSMO to get physically tough, and trained intelligently to reach destinations using the stars to navigate at night.
- The enemy never expected us to go deep behind their defences to attack with the element of surprise, ‘the potent weapon of victory in war’, and was taken aback.
- Enemy weapons, which were installed to fight a conventional battle, had to be turned diametrically opposite, thus achieving plunging fire, which was ineffective.
- Leadership within the unit was truly exemplary; Officers and JCOs led their men from the front.
- Field Marshal Manekshaw’s visit to the formations raised the morale sky high. He made it amply clear that we would go in for the offensive, in his usual humorous way.

I quote his words, ‘Gentlemen, I assure you that you shall go on the offensive. I may not tell you the date because some of you may go and tell Yahya Khan. But let me assure you that you will be surplus of man power and weaponry and whatever you need before “the balloon goes up”.’ He was true to his words. God bless his soul. We had reinforcements just before the war and no deficiency in weaponry.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, too, addressed the troops in almost all formations, before the war broke out. A rare example of political leadership once again!

Dali and Beyond

The battalion was tasked to exploit towards Dali and moved the same afternoon and harboured at 'Kathe ka paar', a place about 8-10 kms from Gadra city, at last light. The attack on Dali, which was believed to be held by two companies, supported by tanks and artillery was launched at 0100 hours on 7 December 1971. The enemy however had no will to fight and withdrew on losing 15 men, a POW, and some ammunition. Enemy aircraft attacked us, but mercifully, there were no casualties. The battalion by now was overstretched. Replenishment of rations and water was done by air, as mechanical vehicles were bogged down in loose sand. As happens sometimes in war, our patrol bumped into a patrol of 21 Rajput, near Khinsar, however the situation was miraculously controlled. The battalion moved to Chhachhro, and occupied the town by 8 December. After the announcement of the ceasefire on 16-17 December. I was given three tons and ordered to exploit inside of Pakistan, as far as possible. I reached Trighatia heights, by evening, took up defences at night, and captured a POW. The next day, I was ordered to advance towards Bhorilla – just 12 kms from a place called Amarkot, where the great Mughal Emperor Akbar was born. We joined the battalion on 17 December, at Chhachhro and were moved thereafter to Naya Chor.

Conclusion

Having served as a tank commander in the 1962 War, and as a company commander in the 1965 war, I was no stranger to war. However, my experience as company commander in the Barmer sector in the 1971 war brought me to the conclusion that wars are always a very complex proposition and should be fought, after meticulous planning and must be ruthlessly executed.

Arduous training, backed by exemplary leadership, is vital for success in war. Morale of troops will remain high, provided the troops are well led. The thumb rule of, 'The more you sweat and toil in peace, the more blood you will save in war' should always be borne in mind. Last, but not the least, the man behind the weapon will always be of paramount importance in all future wars, whatever direction technology might take.

BATTLE OF SANGAM

LIEUTENANT COLONEL R.K. SAINI, SM

I was commissioned into the 7th Battalion the Garhwal Rifles on 9 June 1968. As a Captain, I was the youngest Company Commander going into war.

The clouds of war had been gathering for some time on the horizon and every effort was being made to ensure success with minimal set backs. 7 Garhwal Rifles had moved from Dalhousie to Chhamb, in Jammu and Kashmir. The 'pltan' was deployed in a temporary location with Battalion Headquarter (HQ), at Pallanwala. The companies were positioned in their respective locations. D Company occupied the Khaur village area, along the riverbank.

We had been fine-tuning the Infantry-Tank co-operation drills on 3 December 1971. By evening, everyone was quite sure and confident of the requirements and expectations in a given situation. The exercise was abruptly called off due to the attacks by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) on Indian airfields. Troops returned to their localities and officers assembled, at Battalion Headquarters to be briefed and to receive further orders.

Lieutenant Colonel T.S.J.B. Rana, our Commanding Officer, had just begun the preamble when all hell broke loose! Pakistani jets were screaming past at treetop level. War was declared on 3 December 1971. Every officer rushed to his battle location.

The companies were deployed afresh to hold ground against any Pakistani onslaught. D Company took up defences opposite Nathu Kulian, C Company commanded by Major M.C. Bhandari (who later retired as the first Lieutenant General from the paltan) occupied defences, opposite Chhatti Tahli on my left, while A Company, under Major K.S. Sharawat (who went on to retire as a Brigadier), occupied a position opposite Sangam Post, on the right. The Border Security posts had been overrun during pre-ops by the enemy.

My company, i.e. the D Company held a unique and un-enviable position ahead of a medium battery gun location. These men, as the war progressed, had started a funny practice. Every morning at reveille, they would exchange a, 'Good Morning', salvo with the Pakistanis. The response from the enemy was always prompt. However, their guns could not locate this gun position, or may be the range was not sufficient, so most of their shelling landed on or around my position, forcing us to drop everything and run for cover.

A couple of times some boys had been caught with their pants down, literally. This was also the time when a lot of us came to grips with the reality of losing life or limb. I do not feel ashamed in admitting that fear is a very real, very distressing and numbing emotion for I have experienced it first-hand. For three days, I could not bring myself to step out of my cramped bunker. I was numb with fear. My Company 2iC, Lieutenant A.K. Singh managed the show, while covering up the ignominy. I knew subconsciously that the boys looked up to me for guidance and solace, yet I could not bring myself to overcome my fear. Then, Subedar Jagdish Singh Khatri, the senior JCO, under the pretext of reporting daily events, entered my bunker, and without asking permission pulled up the campstool and sat down.

He took off his helmet, and in his soft soothing voice started speaking. Our Garhwali *paltans* are steeped in traditions. Those days, soldiers including JCOs did not come to you without headgear or sat down without permission. Subedar Khatri had done just that. First, I was seething inside over the liberties he had taken. Then I realised that, a part of my

subconscions was listening to him too. He had been a man of few words, until then. Due to prevailing conditions, Subedar Khatri's retirement had been postponed. I caught his words, '*...hujur aap ko to malum hai meri beti ki shaadi hone wali thi. Ab bus yeh ladai khatam hojae to ghar jaunga. Vaise hujur bhulla log bata rahe the ki aap ki tabiyat theek nahin hai.*' Even in that state of total fear, I admired the respect, apprehension and a hope in that old man's soft voice. He continued, '*... Mujhe bhi bahut dar lagta hai, sab ki tarah. Lekin hujur, jub in bachchon ke chehre dekhta hoon to kuchh der us ko jabardasti daba ke muskra deta hoon. Hujur, yeh apke bachchon se hain. In ladkon ke liye aap aisi dhal ho jiske par koyi takat nuksan nahin pahuncha sakti. Bus yahi bisvas meri bhi takat hai. Jub mere nam ki goli aegi to yeh ladke mujhe kandhon pe le ke jaenge...*' The last sentence cut me like a knife. Subedar Khatri had shaken me out of that abject state of inactivity.

A short time later, I just shucked my *razai*, pulled on my boots, and picking up the Sten gun told him, '*Saab aap bahut zada bolne lage hain. Ladai ke baad apki shikayat SM saab tak karni padegi. Aao chalo!*'

The biggest and most precious reward of my life has been that look of happiness and renewed respect on that weathered, wrinkled face. Subedar Khatri choked back tears as he offered me the helmet. He had taken me, very softly but surely, over my fear of death.

Hats off to Subedar Jagdish Khatri and my 2iC Lt. A.K. Singh!

The army in the Chhamb Sector had been pushed on the back foot by the Pakistani pre-emptive strike on 3 December 1971. Their onslaught continued up to 6 December, as our forces rallied. Consequently, a great deal of work had to be undertaken to improve the defences. The Garhwali *Bhullas* came into their element, quickly adapting and modifying the defences.

On the night of 12-13 December, my company went into action against the Pakistani forces at the Nathu Kulian Post, which had been under our constant and continuous surveillance. We had confirmed information that the post was occupied during the daytime by troops numbering about a platoon strength. There was the minor obstacle of an unconfirmed minefield

between my location and the post in question. D Company formed up at the FUP approximately 200 metres ahead of our defences (distance between the two positions was barely 500 metres). Under the cover of darkness, *Bhullas* silently proceeded in small groups to the FUP. It was amazing to see how quietly and noiselessly they moved, and secured the launch pad for a stealthy attack. Everything was proceeding efficiently, when some small arms fire started from the direction of the post under our attack. Regardless, we pushed on and rushed to the post. The enemy had already fallen back, leaving only some rations and beddings. Having successfully captured the post, the Battalion HQ needed to be informed. I ordered Lance Naik Narender Singh, from the Signal Platoon to get me the battalion net. A number of attempts failed to raise the HQ. Exasperated, I picked up the set. Immediately, as I put the handset of the PRC-25 to my ear, the problem was clear. During the enemy firing, a bullet had ripped the wire connecting the handset to the radio, thumped against the carrier harness, throwing Lance Naik Narender Singh on his back. All this while he had been communicating with thin air. In spite of the tension and a need to keep eyes and ears open for trouble, we could not control our laughter. Narender Singh's pride had suffered! The success signal was fired and a confirmatory message was sent through a dispatch rider.

All company commanders had assembled for briefing, at the Battalion HQ, A Company, commanded by Major K.S. Sharawat was assigned the task of attacking and capturing Sangam Post before midnight of 15 December. It was rumoured that a ceasefire may be declared by the next day. D Company, commanded by Captain R. K. Saini, was to ensure a secure left flank for the attacking forces, i.e. A Company. At last light, my company moved forward towards Nathu Kulian and the post was secured effortlessly. The Battalion HQ was kept informed, and my troops were manning the defences against possible counter-attacks. The assault on Sangam Post was launched at H-hour and it was a success. Major Sharawat was the proud hero of the Sangam battle, possibly the ultimate post captured by the Indian troops in the Chhamb Sector, as the ceasefire rolled in with the first light on 16 December 1971.

ATTACK ON THE DUSSI BUND-BURJ

BRIGADIER RANBIR SINGH

Even at the beginning of 1971, it was becoming evident that the confrontation between India and Pakistan would lead to war. General Manekshaw (later Field Marshal) had visited all the important operational locations to brief his commanders, even down to battalion level, about the impending war situation. Formations were deployed accordingly in the Western Sector.

The 15 Maratha Light Infantry, as a part of 96 Infantry Brigade (15 Infantry Division), was deployed in Bhindiaulak area, behind Saki Nala, a minor water obstacle. Four platoons (one from each Rifle Company) were deployed ahead, as screen positions, to guard the Bhindiaulak Ajnala approach leading to Amritsar.

Pakistan declared war on 3 December 1971, with attacks on our airfields and carried out pre-emptive air strikes and artillery shelling on our front. On 5 December, Pakistani troops probed the screen positions, but did not press the attack. On the morning of 6 December, Pakistani soldiers were seen falling back to their bunkers, on the Dussi Bund and the Burj Post. There was high *sarkanda* (elephant grass) in this area and observation over the Bund, and Post was virtually impossible, even after stationing observation posts on high trees. Patrols sent out at night could not get much information about enemy defences in these areas.

I, at that time second-in-command of 15 Maratha LI, was with the screen positions on 5 December and had observed the activities of the enemy, their firing on the screen positions defences, during the night of 5-6 December and then falling back to their bunkers on the Dussi Bund and Burj Post on the morning of 6 December. I thought that since the enemy was active during the night, they would be resting during the day. I reckoned that it would be a great opportunity to attack the enemy positions on the Dussi and at Burj, during the day, on 6 December and take the enemy by surprise. I therefore, asked for permission to attack the enemy and also put in my demand for one troop of tanks to support the assault on the Bund and a unit, medium battery in direct support. The time for the attack was fixed at 1230 hours that same day. By the time authorization was granted by the higher authorities, and the tanks was moved to their selected position, it was already 1430 hours.

In 1971, units did not have means of radio communication as sophisticated as the ones we have today. There was only one radio set a ANPRC 31, with the platoon. There was no time to send coded messages regarding the screen position to each platoon. So, I had to dash from one platoon to another platoon to brief them about our attack plan. I told our *Ganpats* (Maratha soldiers) that our attack would be successful since the enemy would not be expecting an attack by day, and our battalion would get a good name by capturing the enemy positions with this small strength of four platoons.

The plan outline was that the FUP (Forming up place) would be the sugarcane fields and we would attack in one line, giving the impression of larger numbers. We would cross the SL (Start Line) at 1630 hours. The BSF personnel, about 25 in number, who had fallen back from the Ghoga and Bahlon BSF Posts and were now with the screen positions, would also shout the Maratha war cry, '*Bol Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Ki Jai*', from the location of the screen positions to give the impression that it was a battalion-sized attack. However, they would not form part of the attack. Major Sher Singh, another officer of the battalion, who was the commander of the screen position, was of great help in motivating these BSF men.

We crossed the SL at 1630 hours. I was at the centre of the attack line, exhorting the brave *Ganpats* to move fast and not give the enemy any time to react. Although the Pakistanis were taken by surprise, they still managed to fire at us with LMGs, MMGs and rocket launchers. They also directed artillery fire at us, but it was ineffective, as we had reached too close to their positions on the Bund. Our tanks in fire support role and firing by observation blasted the enemy bunkers on, allowing the *Ganpats* to reach the Bund quite quickly. Very soon, we were on the Bund, face-to-face with the enemy.

On reaching the enemy bunkers, a hand-to-hand fighting began. The Pakistani soldiers continued firing from their bunkers and lobbed hand grenades, which caused some casualties. Some of the Pakistanis fought well, but they were no match for our indomitable *Ganpats*. Quite a few of the enemy soldiers ran away, and swam across the Ravi river, leaving behind their weapons and belongings. The Commanding Officer of this battalion, 43 Baluch, along with his soldiers in the Battalion Headquarter at Burj, also ran away, leaving behind his boots, uniform, personal belongings and a marked map in his bunker.

By about 2030 hours, we had complete control over the enemy position. A success signal was sent to the Battalion Headquarter. Meanwhile, Major G.S. Teja with his B Company also arrived, and we consolidated our position and were fully prepared for the next action.

The enemy left behind 24 dead. Some soldiers were buried in their bunkers, and some more were swept away while crossing Ravi river. It was a total rout of 43 Baluch. We learnt later, through the newspapers, that the battalion was disbanded.

We had 8 dead and 26 injured soldiers. I was also badly wounded during the hand-to-hand fight on the Bund. Grenade splinters had broken my left arm, leaving me with twelve fractures and lacerated wounds. After Major G.S. Teja arrived, I was evacuated to the Regimental Aid Post, then to the Advance Dressing Station on the way to Amritsar. I was shifted from one hospital to another until the grenade splinter embedded in my left arm was

removed. I remained in medical care from 6 December 1971 to 27 June 1972.

The enemy left behind their mortars, RCL guns and a large quantity of other arms and ammunition, sufficient enough for a Divisional attack.

Personnel of 15 Maratha LI I were given thirteen awards for this operation. Sepoy Pandurang Salunke was awarded an MVC. He was shot in the chest, when he assaulted an enemy Rocket Launcher position. Six persons were awarded the Vir Chakra. They were: Major Ranbir Singh, Major Sher Singh, the tank troop leader, the Forward Observation Officer, Second Lieutenant Cherian and Inspector Ajit Singh of the BSF. This was the first time that a BSF officer received a gallantry award for taking part in an operation against the enemy, with an army infantry battalion. Three personnel were also awarded with the Sena Medal, and three were Mentioned-in-Despatches.

The 15 Maratha LI was adjudged the best battalion of the corps and awarded the Battle Honour 'Burj' and Theatre Honour 'Punjab'.

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT WAJID ALI KHAN

COLONEL (DR) S.V. KOTWAL, EX RMO, 11 GUARDS

It all happened a long ago, on 7 December 1971. However, in the mind's eye, it is as fresh as if it were only yesterday.

The 11 Guards was a young battalion and I was youthful and enthusiastic Regimental Medical Officer (RMO). This battalion, an instrument of war, finely honed first by Late Major General K.D. Mazumdar, and then led by Lieutenant General J.M. Singh, Retd., was being put to the test for the very first time. For young officers like me, it was a special thrill to be in, at the bleeding.

We entered Chicken's Neck on the night of 5-6 December, infiltrating through a 1½ km 'Ashok trail', carved out through the dense *sarkanda*, on the Pakistan side of the border and took the enemy by surprise, through their minefield belt covered by enfilading MMG fire. The initial objectives of Chak Naun, Chanor, and Tibba were achieved swiftly, and we had reason to feel rather pleased with ourselves. For us youngsters, it was a heady feeling and the thought of getting wounded, or worse, never entered our minds. War was a lark!

On the morning of 7 December, the Battalion Headquarters congregated at the mango grove in Sir village. The enemy had been freshly evicted from their trenches; there was sugarcane to munch and the elation of victory to cherish. A rickety table and chair had been found for the Commanding

Officer (CO), and he was dictating his despatches to the head clerk, when the fun began.

Four Pakistan MiG-19s (actually the Chinese version, called Shangyeng J6) appeared out of nowhere and proceeded to strafe us. As the bullets started getting uncomfortably close, the CO asked us to get into the trenches. He had just risen and turned away, and the head clerk had barely lifted his memo pad, when the table was blown to smithereens. The moments that followed could well have been out of a Hindi movie.

Often, the normal reaction of an infantryman to an enemy aircraft is to open fire with whatever weapon he has (often with both eyes firmly shut). A gunner officer friend, who fought in another sector, told me how he had once emptied his revolver at an enemy fighter, while in the act of relieving himself one morning! So it was that a lance naik from our sister battalion, the 6/11 Guards, opened fire with his light machine gun and scored a most unlikely direct hit on one of the Pakistani MiG's fuel tank.

I had a grandstand view as the aircraft first spiralled upwards, out of control, and then made its spectacular final vertical dive. A parachute blossomed, indicating the pilot had bailed out. The CO yelled out orders to capture the pilot, but our terriers needed no bidding. Within minutes, the captured pilot was being frogmarched up to the CO.

I suspect being downed by a LMG is not the most heroic way to being shot down, for any fighter pilot. Besides, the sudden ejection and capture would have unnerved anyone. We were, therefore, stunned, by the sheer panache of the pilot. He shot off a parade ground salute and announced, 'Good morning' Sir. Flight Lieutenant Wajid Ali Khan at your service, Sir. This was my first sortie. I knew you were here and I came in very low and very slow. Fortunes of war, Sir. I am your prisoner now.' He was about my age and looked dashing in his flying suit, which certainly created a touch of envy, considering we were all unwashed and dirty. The Adjutant divested him of his side arm and maps, and I had a look at the bruise above his left knee, which was all the damage to his person. Meanwhile, the rest of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) fighters were buzzing around like angry bees. To avoid being shot at by the Pakistani fighters again, we hurriedly got back

into our trenches. He said, 'Surely Sir, you are not going to let me be shot by my own guys.' So, he too was guided into a trench and was dispatched later to the rear, along with other prisoners of the day. I never saw him again. He was the only PAF officer captured on the Western Front.

The earlier part of this episode I know to be true, for I witnessed it myself. The latter part of this story I heard from others. I have no way of verifying it, but I believe it to be true.

Apparently, as our prisoners of the day were being taken in an open 3-ton vehicle, duly blindfolded and handcuffed, with a JCO in charge as an escort, who should be coming in the opposite direction, but our iconic General Officer Commanding (GOC), Gen Z.C. Bakshi. An authentic war hero, with a Vir Chakra and MVC, AVSM and McGregor Medal, he was worshipped by our men. He was (and is) as chivalrous as he was brave, and stopped the vehicle. Where he saw, Wajid Ali, he said, 'This is no way to treat an officer. Come son, hop into my jeep,' he said. It turned out Wajid Ali's father was a general in the Pakistan Army, so the GOC extended all courtesy to the young pilot. Wajid Ali told him he had been injured, so our General promptly sent him off to the Field Hospital with his ADC. On the way, the prisoner jumped off and disappeared into a sugarcane field, from where he had to be captured again!

Several years passed and people went their own ways. I obtained premature retirement in 1999 and set up a practice as an urologist in Delhi.

About six years ago, lying in bed with a *India Today* magazine, one Sunday afternoon, a small item on one of the last pages caught my eye. The Government of Canada had appointed one Wajid Ali Khan, as Special Advisor for Middle East and Afghanistan. The snippet went on to mention that he had served in the PAF. Surely, the same man?

I Googled him. Apparently, Wajid Ali became quite a successful businessman after the war and migrated to Canada. He joined politics and was the first Muslim MP of the Liberal Party in 2004. He served on several committees, voted against his party on the issue of the same-sex marriages, and continued deployment in Afghanistan. He later switched over to the

Conservative Party and quit politics in 2009. Quite a colourful career for an ex-serviceman!

Now, of course, he looks rather portly and respectable, different from the dashing flyer I remember. It would be nice to meet up with him some day. I would like to shake him by the hand, for he is a brave man and the strength of his character in moments of severe stress deserves the highest praise.

SKIRMISH AT CHICKEN'S NECK

COLONEL (DR) S.V. KOTWAL, EX-RMO, 11 GUARDS

For quite some time, in 1971, everyone had know that there would be a war that year. The genocide in East Pakistan had dominated the headlines, and we had been recalled from leave well in advance. Some of us at Muthi got rather embarrassing letters from our parents, anxious for our safety. Roshan Mann's letter from his mother however was different, which is why I remember him giving it to me to read. 'I am looking forward to your return', she wrote. 'I will welcome you back. However, remember, if you do return wrapped in the national flag, I would like to know that the bullet holes were in the chest, not the back. Do not dishonour your mother's milk.' A remarkable letter from an extraordinary woman! However, we were in high spirits, and such uneasy thoughts were soon banished, as we were looking forward to taking part in the battle.

Second Lieutenant R.L. Mann was in command of 11 platoon of D Company. I had earlier nicknamed him 'Gattu' after the mischievous mascot in the Asian Paints ad, which was the rage those days, but it did not really stick after he became a hero. He was short, muscular and energetic, with an outspokenness that bordered on the blunt, but never offensive. He was blessed with an earthy Haryanvi humour, which made him popular with our troops. An ideal regimental officer, and a gentleman to the core; it is the Manns of this world, who lend steel to the spine of our infantry.

Of Guardsman Brij Lal, or Birju as he came to be known, I have different memories. He hailed from Himachal and like all his brethren, was fair and good-looking. He was a quiet man, not particularly good at sports, but a hardworking, soft-spoken young soldier. He came from a respectable family. He had run away from home to enlist, as he was determined to become a soldier. I remember him being brought in one evening to the MI Room, a year before the war, with an ugly gash above his left temple. Apparently, there had been in an altercation of sorts, when he went to a village to procure some small items, and was attacked with an axe. He should have been sent to a hospital, but an injury report would have been filed and an inevitable Court of Inquiry would follow. So I stitched him up in the MI room instead, and the matter was forgotten. He was in the Signals Platoon and was assigned to D Company during the war.

Chicken Neck was formerly called the Dagger Salient, as it projected into India, between Jammu and Akhnur. It was considered a threat to the highway, which is the lifeline of Jammu and Kashmir. Our divisional commander, Major General Z.C. Bakshi, however rechristened it as 'Chicken Neck', which we could wring at will. This was our theatre of war. The country is riverine, with multiple tributaries, or *nullahs*, running north to south to join the east branch of the mighty Chenab. The land is heavily forested with 12-foot-high *sarkanda*, or elephant grass, that clothes the banks of the innumerable streams we had to cross on our way. In winter, a dense fog envelops the land, the temperatures are freezing and the ground is permanently wet and muddy, making it a difficult terrain to navigate.

We entered Chicken Neck on the night of 5-6 December. The advance was rapid, despite it being a particularly cold and foggy winter night, with multiple *nullahs* to be negotiated. The civilians, in the nearly 120 Pakistan villages, had been evacuated in anticipation of the war, but the vacant houses were still a potential threat. The enemy, as we could guess, was retreating rapidly south to POK (Pakistan occupied Kashmir) over four known ferry crossings, which our brigade attempted to seal.

On the night 11-12 December, C Company caught a Pakistani soldier in the Khojchak area. This would have been unremarkable, were it not for the

fact that he spoke only Bengali. Our only Bengali speaking officer, Second Lieutenant 'Khoka' Ghosh was called in to question him. The disclosure was sensational. The soldier was Naik Abdul Batein of the East Bengal Rifles. Apparently, a force of 42 soldiers led by a captain had actually infiltrated from the north on 7 December, with explicit orders to split into groups and create havoc in the rear areas. There were only three Bengalis in the force and they were meant to be cannon fodder – they were pushed ahead to cross minefields, with the Punjabi Pakistanis following safely behind. Abdul claimed to have lost his way in the dense elephant grass and fog, but perhaps, considering his circumstances, he was a deserter. Though he was taken to the scene of his arrest, he was completely disoriented in the dense vegetation, and was of no help in identifying the location of his comrades.

The Commanding Officer (CO) responded immediately to this new threat. Mann's platoon was dispatched to patrol the Sidhara Kalan ferry area, but the night's search yielded nothing. On the morning of 14 December, the exhausted 11 Platoon was recalled to company headquarter, but as the CO intended to search the area himself, Mann and his men rushed back without stopping for breakfast or rest. Guardsman Brij Lal, the signaller of D Company, was detailed to accompany Mann, to ensure communication.

That afternoon, the CO and his protection party of five, saw two enemy soldiers running into the dense *sarkanda* and ordered Mann to prepare for assault from the left flank, where the tall grass provided cover. One platoon of C Company was ordered to divert and establish a firebase, at Gujar Hut, which overlooked a dry *nullah* bed. The CO also planned to call up A Company minus a platoon later, as reinforcement, but as it was close to last light and fog was settling in, he decided to go ahead with the assault immediately.

The CO estimated the enemy strength to be one platoon plus. Enemy firing exposed one MMG, and at least three LMGs. Bearing in mind that the enemy was reportedly 42 strong and Mann had only 24 men with him, the

CO ordered him to make a lot of noise to project a larger body of men, while reinforcements arrived.

As often happens, there was much confusion in the fog of war.

Mann's men were making good progress, firing from the hip, when a totally unexpected turn of events occurred. The commander of Molu Sector, who had an element of CRPF with him, mistakenly thought Mann's boys were firing at his men, who too were dressed in khaki like the enemy, and requested cease fire over the wireless set that Birju carried. The CO was in a fix. The prospect of killing his own troops in fading light appeared so real that he ordered Mann to stop his assault.

Events then happened in rapid succession. Mann and one of his section commanders saw two enemy soldiers in dense cover, about 50 yards away, and pressed home the assault, radioing the CO that the men were definitely the enemy. As they rushed out of cover, Birju saw a MMG post, manned by two men and without a moment's hesitation, charged. As he carried the ANPRC 25 set with him, Mann was out of radio contact.



Second Lieutenant Roshan Mann, SM.

When the smoke cleared, Birju was found lying on top of the enemy soldiers, all three of them dead.

I have often wondered what thoughts crossed Birju's mind in those final moments. Perhaps, the prospect of charging the enemy with fixed bayonet was the culmination of a childhood dream; perhaps it was a purely reflex action, conditioned by training and instinct. One cannot know for certain. All I know is that when the call came for personal bravery in battle, this unpretentious young lad was not found wanting.

Mann had five dead in his platoon and several wounded. For his gallantry, Guardsman Brij Lal received a Vir Chakra posthumously, and Second Lieutenant Mann received a Sena Medal later.

The 11 Guards were awarded the Battle Honour for 'Chicken Neck', an event we commemorate each year. Birju never saw his son, who was born after the war, but his widow attends almost every Chicken Neck Day celebration, where she is accorded a special place of honour as the 'Veer Nari' of the unit. As for Roshan Lal Mann, he retired as a Colonel, and did a stint with the CISF before hanging up his boots.

OP GHURKI

MAJOR HARISH RAUTELA, SM

This is an account of the battle of Ghurki fought by the 8 Battalion, the Garhwal Rifles.

The journey to the border had been long and tedious. The men had to walk for several hours in the scorching sun. Almost all Sundays and holidays were spent in the operational areas doing reconnaissance. There was, however, no sign of tiredness among the men, JCOs and officers, under the inspiring leadership of the Commanding Officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel K. Mahendra Singh. The troops, on an average, covered 20 kms every day.

During the first week of October 1971, we had been kept at six hours' notice for the impending move to our action locations. On 8 October, two companies under young majors, along with their senior JCOs were moved as covering troops. Lieutenant Colonel Suresh Gupta, the second-in-command (2iC), had taken over from Lieutenant Colonel K. Mahindra Singh. The main body was taken to the concentration area by the 2iC on 13 October. The CO issued instructions to officers to drive the RCL jeeps to the operational area, in the absence of drivers.

It took us eight hours to reach the concentration area, as the entire column was stuck due to non-availability of road space. The CO, along with Captains S. Patwal and Tara S. Benipal, moved up to the operational

location ahead of the battalion. The jeep in which they were travelling during recce overturned at a soft bend, leaving the CO seriously injured. The CO was evacuated against his wishes, and Major S.P. Jhingon took over the command of the battalion.

Orders from headquarters (HQ) were received, directing us to move to our operational area as soon as possible. The officiating CO moved up for recce and as I was the officiating 2iC, I was directed to get the battalion to the op area. By 1600 hours on 14 October 1971, we were in our battalion defended area.

The brigade commander, Brigadier Bhupendra Singh, visited the battalion location and was in a very agitated mood. The worry and concern of the brigade commander was justified, as news came in that the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Z.A. Bhutto, had advised General Yahya Khan to launch an offensive in the Western Sector in early October.

During the latter part of October and November, we carried out rehearsals of counterattack, counter-penetration, and readjustment of our defences. While we were busy with our rehearsals, the competing rifle companies always found time to play all types of games.

C Company had been earmarked for offensive operations. The plan was to capture a ranger post and Ghurkhi village, simultaneously. It was estimated that the enemy would hold the ranger post, with two sections supported by MMGs. The post had a wall around it and had a bird's eye view of the area of our defences, whereas, the tree line in front of the village and the ranger post, made our own observations difficult.

Ghurkhi village was expected to be held by approximately one company. According to the initial plan, a raid was planned. Subsequently, as time neared, it became an attack to capture Ghurkhi village and the ranger post. Some of the challenges that we faced during initial planning were:

- (a) Observation to appreciate the correct location of boundaries around the village was scanty.
- (b) A defence layout of the village was not available.

- (c) Ghurkhi village, the objective, was echeloned in depth to two major defended areas of the enemy.
- (d) Information regarding enemy strength was limited.
- (e) The company group had to cross twin canals on improvised *charpoy* rafts.
- (f) Passing through thick *sarkanda* and sugarcane fields limited our visibility.
- (g) The area was dominated by enemy listening posts.
- (h) If the element of surprise was lost, the enemy had only to only execute an enveloping action to counter our plan.
- (j) A counterattack was certain.
- (k) Lastly Ghurkhi village was beyond the range of our mortars.

On 2 December 1971, there was a brigade level war game. The CO mentioned the heavy build-up of enemy forces at Padhana. This was one of the bigger villages and well-fortified too. It was reinforced with armour and minefields. Ghurkhi village was to the west of Padhana, and had to be catered for as far as flanks of the village were concerned. The ranger post could hardly play any role in case Ghurkhi came under attack.

On 3 December, at about 1700 hours, four enemy aircraft flew over us. After about ten minutes or so, anti-aircraft fire was heard. Subsequently, news was received that our airfields had been bombed. Enemy guns were firing into our areas, and our guns were responding. This fire from both sides continued for over 4-5 hours. On 4 December, at about 1300 hours, the code word 'Ahuti' was issued. Final orders for execution of the task were issued and the sequence of action commenced.

By last night, D minus one, all preparations were completed. While the men went to sleep, many like me were deep in thought. I remembered my maternal grandfather, who served with 1/39 Gorkha (Kumaon) Regiment. My father served in the Second World War with the famous 4 Battalion of the Kumaon Regiment. General Thimayya had written to my father to ask why I did not join my father's battalion.

As these thoughts raced through my mind, I asked one of the men, '*Larai ke liye tayyar ho?*' To which, he instantly replied, '*Sahib, jo Gita me likha hai woh satya hai. Agar desh ke kaam aaye toh paltan mai har saal naam ayega. Jab mera beta bharti ho kar iss battalion me aayega toh garv se sar uthayega.*'

Troops arrived at our B Company location by about 2100 hours. While crossing the twin canals, a few *charpoy* rafts disintegrated and some of the men fell into the canal along with their weapons and ammunition. However, they were re-issued weapons and ammunition from B Company, while their weapons were retrieved subsequently.

By about 2230 hours, the entire company had crossed over, and by 2320 hours, they were near the designated forming up place (FUP). No markings were made, as this was well inside enemy territory. It was a moonlit night, yet due to sugarcane fields, *sarkanda*, and the tall tree line, nothing was visible. Communication was only by wireless.

While Subedar Hosiyar was nearing the post, he was fired upon, but managed to establish a foothold inside the ranger post. The enemy now opened up with all that they had. We were lucky because they were not able to guess which direction the attack was coming from. It appeared that the enemy flanks were strongly guarded with tanks and other heavy weapons.

There was no surprise left after we crossed the FUP, as the enemy had tracked us and fired at us with all they had. The situation was very tense. The intensity of the fire was tremendous and this shook the men.

The fire by our mortar platoon, and the guns of the 842 Battery was dead accurate. The enemy had dug a few trenches ahead of the village and, a drain four to five feet deep ran from north to south. Beyond the drain was an open ground.

The open area was actually the enemy's designated killing ground. We were plastered with bursts of all small arms fire, followed by the heavy crunch of artillery. By about 0245 hours, we had gained a foothold, and the most difficult task of clearing the village started. Each house and *galli* had to be cleared. The entire enemy artillery, tank fire, and MMGs from Salor village were now diverted on to Ghurki.

The village had four prominent parts. In the north was the masjid complex, in the west the garden complex, in the east, the houses complex and in the south, the bend complex. Most houses were made of brick, with outer peripheries stretching out like fingers of a hand. By this time, the enemy had withdrawn from the village, and at 0330 hours, the code word for capture of Ghurkhi village and ranger post was given.

Just before first light, enemy tanks fired from three directions, this was followed by concentrated fire. Their counterattack had built up from the direction of Padhana, to the north. We had decided to fight up to the last round and last man, and had planned to allow the tanks to come closer and then deal with them appropriately. The enemy closed in from several directions, but this counterattack was also beaten back.

When it was daylight and the report came to me, some men were missing. The direction from where we had advanced had thick *sarkanda* and sugarcane fields, and the area was completely dominated by enemy weapons. One of our patrols reported that one of our casualties was lying in that area. We recovered and evacuated him. Evacuating casualties to the battalion was a problem. We used *charpais* from the village and it required six people to lift one casualty. During war, casualty evacuation is an important aspect, as it directly affects the morale of the troops.

Thereafter, the defence of the village and the ranger post proved to be an uphill task. The battalion *panditji* played an important role, and continuously motivated the soldiers. Subedar M. Netar Singh too left no stone unturned to encourage the men. Captain Patwal, the adjutant, was energetic and resourceful and made sure that the troops, were supplied with all that they needed.

Lieutenant Surinder and Lieutenant Benipal took out a fighting patrol and attacked the ranger post, which had been reoccupied by the enemy when the battalion launched its attack to capture its main objective. They were successful in recapturing the post.

Major Bharat Singh had been tasked to capture another post, called Laloo, but after a recce, this plan was given up. Laloo had been strongly reinforced by the enemy, after we captured Ghurkhi. We hurriedly broke

down walls of the houses to allow the sections and platoons to ensure that they could cover each other and the ground in front, in preparation for the expected counterattack. The enemy did send patrols to infiltrate our positions, but we were able to counter their raids.

The Ghurkhi village had a well-built masjid; part of it had been destroyed by the enemy artillery fire. The *Bhullas* (as Garhwali soldiers are called) repaired it and placed the Quran Sharif and the maulviji from 16 Grenadiers was requested to visit and conduct the *nammaz*.

After the ceasefire, a flag meeting was held with the Pakistani commanders, at battalion level, Lieutenant Colonel S.P. Jhington, Major H.S. Rautela, the Artillery OP officer and Captain Shastry, attended from our side. The Pakistani side was represented by Lieutenant Colonel Raja Sanhat Khan Rana and three of his officers. The area of control was indicated on the ground. Both sides had come with their armed escorts.

The battle of Ghurkhi proved the capability of our troops to contain major enemy forces in their strongly fortified areas. The exceptional leadership kept the troops motivated despite adverse conditions. Such feats are achieved by officers leading from the front. The battalion had continuously held localities against enemy attacks, and a number of counterattacks and infiltration attacks by the enemy were beaten back, over several days and nights. Casualties suffered due to heavy artillery fire, tank fire and even air attacks were minimal.

The unit had captured the maximum area in the Western Sector. Our actions proved the ineffectiveness of enemy tank and artillery fire. Out of the box solutions were found for fighting in built-up areas, and the battalion showed its offensive spirit in tackling a well-defended position and succeeded in capturing it. *Bhullas* did and will always do it. The loyalty and dedication to the nation, the regiment, the battalion was very much in evidence. We recalled the example set by our forebears during the previous wars, and hoped that we too had proved our courage. We did it during 1962, and in 1965 and again, during the 1971 war. We have confidence in our future commanders and *Bhullas*, who will serve in the finest regiment of the Indian Army.

With memories of all those who sacrificed the prime of their lives for the nation, it is due to them that we, serving and retired, hold our head high, 'Amin'.

'Jai Badri Vishal Lal.'

A STAFF OFFICER'S STORY

1971 OPERATIONS IN THE WESTERN SECTOR

COLONEL GURDEEP SINGH GILL

In 1970, I was posted as a Brigade Major (BM) to an Infantry Brigade in Ferozepur. Our operational role was in the Khemkaran Sector. In July 1971, the Brigade Headquarters was ordered out as the controlling Headquarters of a battalion, to occupy a covering position, and to keep an eye on Pakistani activities, in conjunction with the Border Security Force. By the last week of October, deployment for the whole division was ordered and we moved to our operational areas.

We were the flanking brigade of the Ferozepur Division and we tied up with our counterparts of the Amritsar Division. I found a pair of Post and Telegraph (P&T) lines passing next to my headquarters, and I asked my Signals Company Commander to tap the line and see where, and with whom, we could connect. On the other end of the line, we got the headquarters of the neighbouring brigade of the Amritsar Division, who had done the same. We connected a telephone and were on listening watch. At night, we would ring to see that it was functional. We also informed the post master of the village post office about what we had done and he was fine with it, so long as we did not make calls.

On the day hostilities broke out, our brigade commander had gone to the Divisional Headquarters for an operational conference and in turn, we had called the commanding officers to come to the Brigade Headquarters, for a conference and to have dinner. It was December and would get dark by 5.30 p.m. At around 5 p.m., our P&T line started ringing and my GSO 3 picked up the telephone. I was called from my bunker to the ops room, and told that the BM of the neighbouring Brigade was on the line, and wanted to talk to me urgently.

I came to the operations dugout and the BM on the other end of the line, told me that the war had begun and that the Pakistani Air Force had attacked the Amritsar airport. I immediately ordered a 'stand to'. The first thing I had to do was to tell my Battalion Commanding Officers (COs) to return to their locations. Since there was radio silence, the only way to communicate was the line. I got the nearest CO to stay put, and the second adjutant was asked to intercept his CO and ask him to turn back. He was intercepted half way, at a bridge on a canal. The third, who was the farthest, was out of contact, as he had been on his way for a while and had to travel via a long circuitous route.

I got hold of the second-in-command and told him to stay on the line. I got all the senior most officers available in each location, on the line for a conference call and told them that the war was on and they should order a stand to and stay there until I tell them otherwise. I then got to the Divisional Operations room and asked the duty officer to get the senior most Operations staff officer on line. The GSO 2 came on line after a few minutes, and I gave him the news. I told him to get out of the Ops Room and listen, as by now Pakistani guns had opened up on Amritsar and the thump of artillery fire could be clearly heard in the still winter night. Phones were ringing off the hook as everyone had many questions. Then, all hell broke loose. Shelling started on our sector. It was a pounding of a kind one does not easily forget. I ordered all non-essential communications to stop, the lines were to be kept open for operational communications only. Lines to the battalions were the first to go, and radio communications were activated.

Everyone was asked to stay on listening watch. The first calls were from the Border Observation Posts (BOP), manned by the BSF, requesting permission to withdraw, as their positions were not tactically sited and they were sitting ducks. I ordered all posts to hold fast and withdraw only if attacked. In the absence of my commander, I had to take all decisions and hold the fort.

The Col GS (Colonel General Staff) from the Divisional Ops Room got on the line and asked me to keep in touch and keep him posted on all the decisions I took. He told me that my commander was on his way back and would be there in an hour. The Commanding Officer of the third battalion was now halfway, and wanted to know what was going on. I briefly told him of the developing situation and asked him to go back to his location. Then the first crisis broke out.

The middle battallion was out of contact. I was preparing an officer to proceed with a radio set to go to the Battalion HQ, when contact was re-established. I was frantic and asked the adjutant if his set was okay. He said the shelling was so heavy that he had to pull the set into the dugout. I told him to make a niche on the side and ensure that the aerial is clear and that he should not be out of contact, no matter what. The same orders were passed to all the others. Remaining in contact was of utmost priority. By now, the desperate BSF men started pulling out, especially from the posts that were right in front, and in the open. Some of them were asked to pull back and take up positions to cover the withdrawal, in case of enemy action. Finally, my commander arrived, with the direct support of the artillery regimental commander. By now, our own guns had started firing back. I was relieved to see him. I briefed him and he took control.

The first hours were action packed. Information was streaming in from many sources. The artillery net was giving information from multiple fronts, as the guns within range were being switched from less important targets to others on priority. One did not know how the time flew, and before we knew it was morning. However, the intensity of enemy artillery shelling did not diminish. Most young officers were under such intense fire for the first time. A bigger complication was the civilians in the villages. It

was night and they all came into the bunkers of our defences. The children were frightened and crying. The mothers were frantic for the safety of their young ones. I told the adjutants to advise them to get into the *pucca* houses, station the men as lookouts towards the Pakistan border, and keep watch. It was a long night, and by early morning, the women and children were pulled out to safety in batches, supervised by the soldiers. The men stayed back to look after their homes and were a great help as lookouts. Wherever the BSF had pulled out of their posts, we tried to dominate by constantly patrolling the area, but at most places it became no man's land.

We had very good defences behind water obstacles. On the second or the third night, one of the forward battalions was fired upon from a flank; every weapon opened up and return fire went on for the best part of the night. The next morning, the expended ammunition was replenished. There was a repeat performance the following day. I asked the adjutant what was happening, as we had expended so much ammunition, but had nothing to show for it. I was told that they had a listening post of one NCO and two men, who were reporting movement when the enemy opened fire. They pulled back into the defences. I discussed the matter with my commander and suggested that we send out teams commanded by two young officers who I considered fit for the job. The commander, an infantryman, very reluctantly, agreed. I called both the youngsters for a personal briefing. We selected a couple of spots and worked out a detailed plan of response to enemy's actions. The boys were brilliant and for the rest of the war, we had so dominated the area that we had no more 'Diwali' nights. The battalion commanders also started sending young officers on such missions. It was great to see the young officers' enthusiasm and skill.

As I have mentioned earlier, the line communications were a major casualty. I found that my signal boys were brilliant and would restore the lines in no time. Therefore, I called some of the boys for a personal acknowledgement of their work. I asked them whether they were finding the breaks and patching up, or relaying the lines from the break points to break points. One young man said that in this kind shelling there was no point in risking ones life, they just tie a dispenser pack on the back and

sprint across until it is finished and the next man takes on until they reach the command post and reconnect. I was shocked because this was my stock to lay the line behind the leading elements in an attack. Well, all I could do was to place a request for replenishment, and explain to the division how I could expend so many dispenser packs in a defensive battle of moderate intensity. One good thing about wartime conditions is that no query persists for long as new events overtake the previous ones. All that mattered was that we were always in contact.

The intensity of shelling did not lessen. After a while, the doctor and the dental officer crawled into our dugout and wanted to find out why the Advanced Dressing Station (ADS) was being so heavily shelled. Unfortunately, the ADS were situated right in line with the Brigade HQ and all the plusses, which unfortunately, were many; and therefore, they were also in the line of fire. When they saw the kind of treatment we were subjected to, they quickly crawled out, back to their location. After the cease fire, I went to the ADS and I had never seen such good digging by Medicos, in all my service. Active fire is a great teacher. You learn to survive rather fast.

Finally, an officer who was extremely cautious and took no chances had been hit. This officer would always move in the communication trench, and never outside. I got a message the he had been hit and my first thought was that, in the trench, his head must have been out and he must have copped it, with a hit on the upper part of his body. I was told that he was walking out of the trench, for once, and he got a splinter in the leg. Lucky man, that is what I call 'luck of the draw'.

BATTLE OF BURJ

MAJOR GENERAL H.C. SACHDEV, SM

The 1971 operation proved to be a momentous one, as the events that occurred proved the worthiness of 15 Maratha Light Infantry, which was only five years old at that time. The battalion occupied defences in Mudh, north of Amritsar. The battalion was on the orbat of 96 Infantry Brigade, and 15 Infantry Division. On the night of 3-4 December 1971, the enemy attacked our BSF posts and captured Fatehpur and Burj on the Dhussi Bund. This gain gave the enemy a firm base for launching further operations. To regain lost territory, a successful and daring counterattack was launched on Burj, and it was captured on 6 December. A series of counterattacks by the enemy to recapture Burj were repulsed. The battle of Burj will go down in the annals of history as one of the epic battles fought against a numerically superior enemy.

Battle of Burj (6 December 1971)

At around 1230 hours on 6 December 1971, about 70 men attacked the left flank of Bhindi Aulakh post, which was held by Subedar Ramsing Jagtap's platoon. When the attack came in, there were about ten men in their positions and the rest of the platoon was resting. At 1230 hours, Major Ranbir Singh saw the situation and rushed with approximately one section strength and one extra light machine gun, from the right flank of Bhindi

Aulakh, where he initially had his headquarters, to the left flank, which was being attacked. Major Singh, along with the section and Subedar Jagtap's platoon held the position and engaged the enemy effectively. The enemy was pinned down with company weapons (machine guns and rifles), of Subedar Jagtap's position, and slowly and gradually withdrew.

Major Ranbir Singh, after seeing this, thought that this was the best chance to attack Tur post. He left with about a section, with two light machine guns, and Subedar Ramsingh Jagtap for the post. He, along with rest of the men, came back to his initial position, i.e. at the right flank of Bhindi Aulakh. He sought permission from the commanding officer to capture Tur post. Permission was granted. Major Ranbir Singh moved south of Bhindi Aulakh, contacted the armour troop commander, and discussed the plan with him. He ordered him to go from the east of Tur, and decided to assault from the south himself. The troop commander accepted the plan and assaulted the Tur position from the east, with his troop of armour. After the armour troop was within 100 yards of Tur, Major Singh attacked the post and advanced towards Dhussi Bund. During the attack, a grave threat arose due to effective enemy anti-tank fire. Seeing the danger being caused to their own tanks, Sepoy Pandurang Salunkhe charged towards the enemy rocket launcher (RL), pounced on the Pakistani sepoy and dislodged the rocket launcher. His action resulted in elimination of the threat to our own tanks and assisted the 15 Maratha LI attack immensely, resulting in the rout of the enemy. However, in the action, he was shot at point blank range by a sten burst, which resulted in death of this gallant and brave soldier.

Major Ranbir Singh told the armour troop commander to cross Dhussi and go in for the Burj post from the east. Meanwhile, re-organization was carried out on Dhussi Bund, as Major G.S. Teja along with his company had arrived to attack Burj. The arrival of this company helped in conducting the operation on the Burj post. After the tanks had crossed Dhussi and were near the Burj post, the balance force assaulted from the east side of the Burj post. A havildar of 15 Maratha LI encountered anti-tank mines and rushed to the armour troop commander to convey that there were anti-tank mines near the Burj post. This averted tank casualties. The battalion captured 11

Browning Machine Guns, 16 rifles, eight stens, one GF rifle, two 3.5 inch rocket launchers, one 75 mm RCL, one telephone exchange, two telephone sets, six ANPRC 31 radio sets, three 96 CRPC radio sets, three R Set 105 D and a full truck load of ammunition and equipment. The enemy, 43 Baluch Regiment, left behind 52 dead. Approximately two companies of 43 Baluch were completely lost in this operation, as a number of Pakistani troops were drowned in river Ravi, while withdrawing in haste out of sheer fear. It was later known that the Commanding Officer of 43 Baluch, Lieutenant Colonel Syed Hassanuddin was wounded. His suitcase containing personal documents was later recovered from Vera. Major Ranbir Singh was wounded, evacuated, and later awarded the Vir Chakra.

Operations on 9 December 1971

A surprise action by two platoons of the BSF, soldiers of 15 Maratha LI and a troop of armour from 66 Armoured Regiment, on 6 December, had pushed the enemy out of Burj. This humiliating defeat made the enemy very bitter and thus in order to regain this area, they launched a series of fierce counterattacks on the forenoon of 9 December 1971.

Enemy Action

Vera was guarded by a section patrol of 15 Maratha LI. Shortly after midday, intense enemy artillery shelling started. At about 1245 hours, from across Dhussi Bund, a platoon of enemy emerged from the tall *sarkanda* and overpowered the section post. Thereafter, the enemy continued their advance towards Burj, which they successfully captured. By about 1330 hours, they were in complete control of the Dhussi Bund, up to the area of the Burj post, and were thus able to bring accurate small arms fire at Tur on our troops, from the east of the post. At this stage, it appeared that the enemy succeeded in their aim of retaking the area that they had lost to us three days earlier.

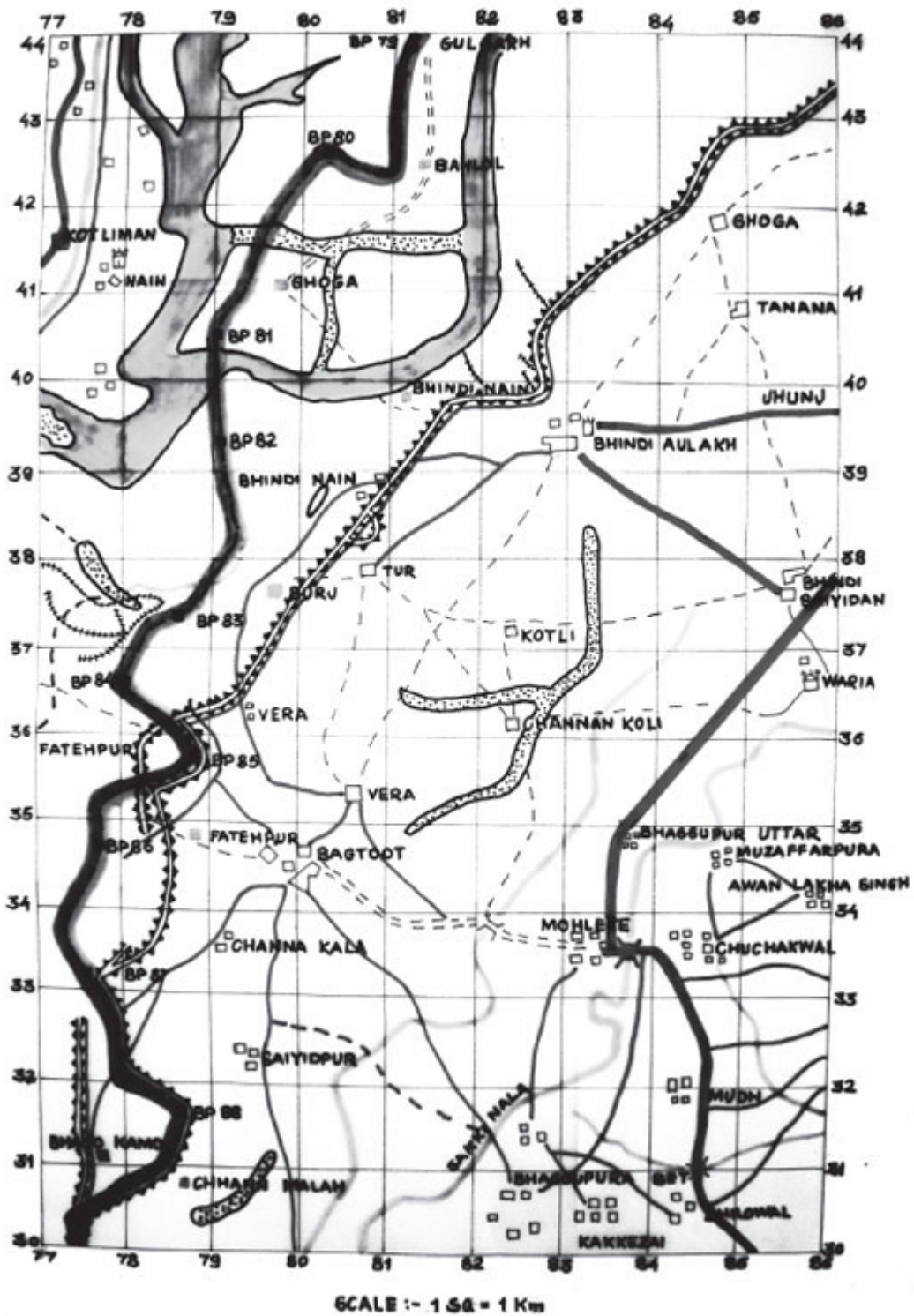
Own Action

Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Sachdev, Commanding Officer 15 Maratha LI was at Tur. His presence at the scene of action proved immensely valuable, and he was able to assume control of the operation before the situation could deteriorate further. The enemy was engaged by small arms fire from Tur. It was then decided to launch a counterattack on the Burj area by a platoon of the B Company, under Major G.S. Teja, along with a reorganised platoon of 23 BSF.

The regrouped platoon was made up of BSF personnel, who were available in the area during that time. Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Sachdev, went with the assault, through heavy enemy shelling and MMG fire, and encouraged the boys to press on, despite heavy odds and enemy opposition of a company plus. The offensive succeeded by 1430 hours. Moreover, the situation was exploited further and control over Vera was regained by 1445 hours. Later, the enemy was again seen forming up in the area of Pak Fatehpur post for an attack on Vera. The commando platoon then reinforced the position. The enemy was engaged with artillery and small arms fire and was repulsed by 1600 hours. Soon afterwards, at about 1630 hours, two of the enemy companies appeared from the direction of New Dhussi Bund, and came opposite Vera. Once again, the enemy found the fire too effective to drive home their attack. The enemy was made to retreat after several unsuccessful attacks.

It is now known that the enemy had suffered very heavy casualties and had lost large stocks of arms and equipment. In addition to three BMGs (Browning Machine Guns) and two 3.5 inch RLs (rocket launchers) recovered by our own troops, one enemy jeep and one trailer with a burst tyre, were also found abandoned near Vera, and recovered later. In addition, two 106 Recoilless Rifle guns, mounted on jeeps, and six 81mm mortars were captured. It was a bold decision taken by Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Sachdev, and his personal leadership in the assault that led to the enemy's annihilation in Burj and Vera. In this action, we suffered about twenty odd casualties, five of which were fatal. Apart from Major G.S. Teja, who led his men with cool courage and determination, some incidents of exceptional heroism and courage also took place. Sepoy Hanmant More of 15 Maratha

LI, rushed on two different enemy BMG positions and dragged out the weapons. The men of 23 BSF Battalion and 66 Armoured Regiment played their roles magnificently. In this action, one of our tanks was destroyed by a shell and one suffered slight damage due to mines. Credit also goes to Captain Cherian of the 177 Field Regiment, whose dogged perseverance ensured that our shells landed where they were needed the most. Despite having sustained an injury in an action, he refused to be evacuated, at his own request. He continued to stay until 9 December and rendered invaluable service, disregarding his personal welfare.



Map of the Burj area.

In this counterattack, the enemy left behind 32 dead and took with them a large number of wounded. The remaining two companies of 43 Baluch

were written off and it was later known from a POW that the battalion was disbanded by the enemy high command. The 15 Maratha LI had the distinction of wiping out 43 Baluch. The positions at Vera and Burj were now reinforced by a company under Major R.G. Mathur, and the whole battalion was now deployed on the Dhussi, except one company, which was deployed at an erstwhile location of the battalion, at Mudh. The 15 Maratha LI was now deployed from Bhindi Aulakh to Chankala. Dagtoot, by now, had become the firm base for all further operations into enemy territory, which was solely due to the undaunted courage of Major V.P. Tiwari and Captain Kalhon of the Artillery Operation, and the men they commanded. On the right flank, Vera and Burj were now held in strength. The recapture of Burj by 15 Maratha LI, further facilitated 8 Sikh LI in capture of Pak Fatehpur. The battalion and attached troops were awarded one MVC, six Vir Chakra, five SM, and three MDs. And the Battle Honour of Burj and Theatre Honour of Punjab. It was also awarded the trophy by XI Corps for best results in the Corps theatre in the war.

CAPTURE OF RING CONTOUR

COLONEL SURENDRA SINGH TOMAR

Background

The danger of Pakistani aggression was looming large over the country, in the wake of political instability in East Pakistan since the beginning of 1971. Daily clashes were occurring between the Mukti Bahini and the Pakistani Army, in East Pakistan. It was anticipated that hostilities might flare up in the Western theatre at any time, to distract the attention of the world from atrocities being perpetrated in the East.

Between September and November 1971, I was attending the Technical Officers Course in the Directorate of Psychological Research, at the Army Headquarters. During the third week of October, I learned that a general alert had been ordered. All ranks belonging to the Eastern Command, attending various courses, were ordered to report to their units prematurely. However, personnel of Western Command, whose courses were to end by November, were allowed to continue.

Events as They Unfolded

On termination of the course, I arrived at the Uri base on the night of 28 November. The place that was normally bustling with activity, were a desolate look, with absolutely no buzz except the cold, chilly wind blowing

fiercely. Only Captain C.K.K. Marar, Battalion Quarter Master, was manning the base. He told me that the battalion was on full operational alert, since 12 October. He also hinted that the commanding officer was anxiously awaiting my arrival, as I had been earmarked for some special mission. Captain Marar informed the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Jasbir Singh, about my arrival. I was ordered to report immediately. Within an hour, I changed into battle uniform and proceeded to my company-defended locality which was in depth in the Sokar-I, Sokar and Sokar-III complex.

I had hardly spent half an hour with my platoon commanders, when I was called to the CO's command post, located at Balan. The CO welcomed me with his typical grin. He said that my C Company had been earmarked to capture 'Ring Contour' and the GOC and the brigade commander had categorically stated that it was to be captured at any cost.

'Tomar, I am quite sure that you will deliver the goods and keep the banner of second-to-none flying sky high,' said Lieutenant Colonel Jasbir Singh, Commanding Officer, 2 Assam.

'Sir, every drop of my blood is for the nation. You know very well that "Thakur" is my nickname in the battalion. You can assure the GOC and the brigade commander.' I replied.

During 1971, 2 Assam was deployed on a network of piquet's known as Seb-Santra Complex, in Uri Sector (J&K), as part of 161 Infantry Brigade, 19 Infantry Division. Our posts were opposite Pakistan's defences based in the famous Hajipur Pass. Pakistan's 14 Baluch was deployed on ridges known as the Sank-Sawanpathri I, II, III complex, opposite us.

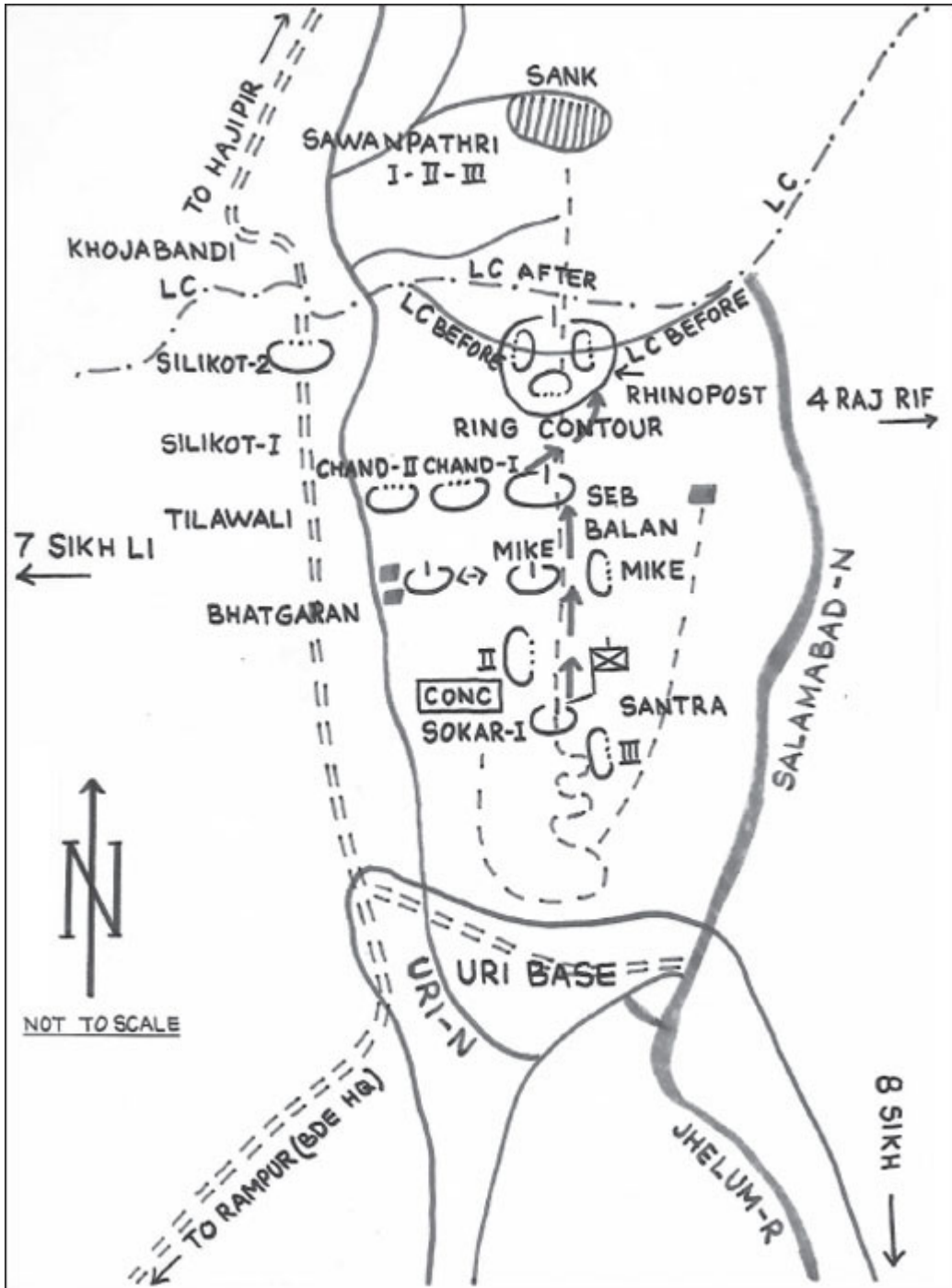
The CO explained to me the strategic and tactical importance of Ring Contour. Tactically speaking, the geographical location of this place meant that whichever side occupied it first would be in an advantageous position, as it dominated the area all around, by fire and observation. If the Pakistani forces captured it that would help them in their build up, in case they decided to launch an offensive towards Uri. A brigade group could have easily built up in the area of the Ring Contour. That is why GOC 19 Infantry Division, Major General E. D'Souza was concerned and told the

brigade commander, Brigadier K.K. Nanda, and the commanding officer, to ensure its capture the moment hostilities commenced.

The CO explained to me the general operational plan of the limited offensive. 7 Sikh LI was attacking on our left flank. In the centre was C Company, while 2 Assam was in the rear, across the Jhelum river, with 8 Sikh attacking the Pak post Jhandi Malli (see map for deployment and attack plan). So far as my company was concerned, there were two options, i.e. Plan-I and Plan-II. Plan-I was a frontal attack, if it was not occupied and Plan-II was to attack it from the flank, via a concealed route, if occupied by the enemy. The most important aspect in both eventualities was to maintain the element of surprise. Therefore, it was supposed to be a silent attack. Although fire plan and other support were catered for, since hostilities were imminent, time was at a premium. I was ordered to ensure the full-fledged preparation of my company for attack. Some spadework had already been done. I was to tie-up details of additional strength required, fire support logistics support, reorganisation etc. Based on the commander's appreciation and intentions, a series of reconnaissance missions had commenced. The commanding officer, the battery commander, the company commander, the company second-in-command, the forward observation officer, and I carried out reconnaissance missions over three consecutive nights. On one of the nights, I took all the commanders of the company to show them the actual places on the ground, where they had to site their sub-unit weapons once we occupied the location. All this activity was quite strenuous to both mind and body, especially the calf muscles which ached badly, due to the constant ascent and descent, on undulating ridges.

On the last day, 3 December, the CO decided to carry out a day light recon of the feature from a concealed route through the jungle. When we set off for this recon, we did not know that this would be our last recon, as D-day was still a mystery. However, the intelligence report that the enemy was likely to carry out a pre-emptive air strike, and limited offensive in selected areas, gave us the idea that the green signal would follow any time. The subsequent events proved that our guess was not far from the truth. At about 1030-1100 hours, the radio set operator informed the CO that the

brigade commander, Brigadier K.K. Nanda, had arrived at the forward defence area and wanted to speak with him. After talking to the brigade commander, the CO told us to postpone any further recce, as the brigade commander wanted us back. Here, an interesting, yet hair-raising event occurred.



As we had not seen what the forward portion of the place looked like, after a hurried consultation with my Forward Observation Officer (FOO) I asked the CO whether the FOO and I could go earlier, to check out the neck-like bulge, near the enemy piquet at Sank. The CO okayed it. We had reached a spot just short of where the jungle line was about to end, when I heard the sound of wood being chopped. I halted, put my finger over my lips, as a signal to Captain N.K. Dawar to observe complete silence. Simultaneously, I gave a signal to the FOO's technical assistant, who was the only OR with us, to hand over the binoculars to me. I had hardly focused the binoculars, when through my naked eyes, I saw a Pakistani soldier standing up from out of the bushes, with a *balli* on his shoulder. He was just 30 yards from us. His back was towards us, his rifle slung on his left shoulder. He was in complete Field Service Marching Order (FSMO). Seeing him, I hit the ground with lightning speed and crawled to take position behind the nearest pine tree. Sensing some danger, the FOO and Technical Assistant (TA), who were just 15 yards behind me, also took cover behind the trees. Immediately, five more soldiers appeared out of the bushes, with *ballies* on their shoulders, identically clad, and armed. Out of curiosity, the FOO also crawled to my location. I whispered and pointed out the enemy to him. He was keen to shoot at them, with his rifle. I forbade him, as we did not want the enemy to know about our presence in the area. Then we crawled back, in panther style, to a distance of about 50 yards. Making sure that we were hidden from the enemy's view, we stood up and ran quickly to where the CO's group was waiting for us. I apprised him of the enemy's presence in the area, and we went back. Later, reflecting on this incident, I shuddered to think of the consequences had we just walked into the enemy's trap. We were lucky that the enemy was not alert, or they would have anticipated our presence during daylight, in their area.

The CO had a brief conversation with the brigade commander informing him of what had happened. He then directed me to rush down to my company location and to bring it up to Balan, by last light. Thus ended the

period of recce, as it was now obvious that in all probability, the green signal might be given at night. I virtually ran to my company-defended location, which was quite far down at Sokar complex.

When I concentrated my company, at Sokar-I, my men asked me if it was the real move or another rehearsal. That's how I learnt that in my absence, on two previous occasions, the company had been moved up for rehearsal, which is why they thought that the move that day would be on similar lines. Then, I told them that it was not a rehearsal, we would go in to capture Ring Contour and that everybody should be both mentally and physically prepared for this. By about 1800 hours, I was at Balan with my company, and reported to the CO for further orders. The CO said that I would be allowed to go in once the Brigade HQ gave the green signal. As the CO was listening to the BBC news bulletin, which had broadcasted the pre-emptive strike by Pakistan, he felt that the green signal would come at any time. He was right.

I had come to the mortar officer's bunker to relax, for as long as it was possible. I took a *makai ka roti* with *aloo sabji* into my soiled hands and ate it. I did not have time to have my lunch that day, so that single roti was most delicious. In the evening, a patrolling party from my company, under Sub Nikhuma, was sent out to keep a watch on enemy activities on Ring Countour. They were to pass back information, if the enemy came and occupied it before us. The green signal from the brigade came at about 2000 hours. C Company crossed the Forward Defence Localities (FDLs), through the mine field lane of Seb piquet, at about 2015 hours, with 7 platoon under the command of Naib Subedar Radha Mohan Singha. They were followed by my party, 8 platoon under Subedar Amar Tangkhul. 9 platoon with section MMG, detachment RCL and Pioneer platoon personnel under comd captain followed with K.S. Thapa, who was given to me as Company 2iC, for this action. Subedar Nikhuma who had gone with a patrol was to command 9 platoon. Later, Capt. K.S. Thapa proved to be quite an asset to me throughout.

C Company had just crossed the Listening Post (LP), manned by a section from B Company, about 600 yards ahead of the FDLs, when the

Pakistani artillery opened up on a wide frontage. I could see the flash of shells dropping on the piquets of 7 Sikh LI and 4 Raj Rif. The shells were going over our head, with a zooming sound and dropping at Seb, Balan and Mike piquets. The company was unaffected. But the first shock of the battle was discernible and some of the men hit the ground, on hearing the sound of the passing shells. I was moving at a very slow pace, as there was no track as such. We were walking on the side of a narrow ledge and a single misstep could take one rolling down, somewhere deep into the valley.

Suddenly, a message was relayed from the rear, 'halt-halt-halt'. I could think of no reason for this, but I halted the company regardless. Meanwhile, a runner from the Listening Post (LP) came and told me that the Officer Commanding (OC) B Company had asked him to stop the company. I was in a hell of a fix. I decided to go to the LP and to personally talk to the CO on the telephone. This LP was an open trench 6'×6'. As I jumped in, a shell burst outside, about 10 yards away. I kept cleaning the dust that had gone into my mouth with one hand, and with the other, I was searching for the telephone in the darkness. Ultimately, I got through to the CO and asked him the reason for halting my company.

He said, 'I never asked them to halt. I told Kapu (Maj V.L. Ruata) to apprise you that the patrolling party has informed that Ring Contour has been occupied by the enemy, so you have to take action accordingly. Are you not in communication with Sub Nikhuma? He is trying to contact you.'

I said, 'I have received no information on the VM25A set. Even on the AN PRC-25 set, I have tried to contact him by switching over to his frequency, but there was no response.'

The CO then remarked, 'It may be due to your being in depression and the signals getting screened. Anyway, what is your plan?'

I replied, 'My reverting to Plan-II is out of the question, at this late stage, as it would involve a delay of 3 to 4 hours. I am going head on. I am hardly 600-800 yards short of the objective and the more delay we cause, the greater the time the enemy will get to organize himself. In any case, he has not had time to carry out any digging, so I've decided to execute Plan-I only with slight changes.'

The CO laughed on the phone and again reminded me of a Vir Chakra, the prestige and honour of the regiment and wished me all the best. I assured him of my success and left the LP.

I ordered the company to resume its advance. I, however, received news from 7 platoon that one of the sections seem to have strayed in the darkness and the platoon commander wanted to know whether to wait for it or advance. I was slightly annoyed, but realized that these things do happen in war. Since time was at a premium and I had already lost 20 minutes due to the LP episode, I ordered 7 platoon to resume the advance, minus the section, which could join up later, 'Let the blighters go to hell.'

On reaching the rear bump, about 100 yards short of Ring Contour, I told Capt. K.S. Thapa to stay there with 9 platoon and supporting elements. Since I had received information about the enemy patrol's presence, I ordered 7 and 8 platoon to come into extended line, on a prefixed signal. This happened in a horizontal depression, about 100 yards short of the feature and concealed from the enemy's view. I had already briefed the troops that fire will only be opened once the enemy fires upon us. For whatever reasons they might have had, there was no firing from the enemy side, so the platoons halted, and went to their allotted areas, along a track, as I had briefed the commanders during the reconnaissance stage.

Here, an interesting event took place. Before the platoons wheeled to the left and right, to go to their areas, they had taken lying position along the track, on my orders. While in lying position, I noticed that the lush green grass on the Ring Contour, appeared to have been tampered with. I asked my runner to probe the dugout patches of grass with a bayonet. He did and replied in typical Assam regiment style, '*Yeh to pathor ka mafik kuchh hai* (it is like a stone).'

I then ordered the platoons to go to their area. I stood up and walked straight, leaving behind the company HQ and FOO's party. As I walked across, I saw three horizontal lines, at an interval of 2 feet in each line, and the vertical distance of 1 yard, between the lines. The grass had clearly been disturbed. After a gap of about 25-30 yards, there were three horizontal

lines in a similar pattern. I could make out that these were land mines, which the enemy had laid in an unconventional manner to cause casualties.

This was confirmed when I reached the farther end, and struck against the barbed wire, which the enemy was in the process of erecting. This was the second time, within a short span of few hours that, I had a miraculous escape. Simultaneously, I saw some shadows under a clump of trees on the forward edge of the Ring Contour, and before I could realize what was happening, I saw them jumping and running into the depression with lightning speed. They had left behind bundles of barbed wire and angle iron pickets. Later, during the flag meeting, I learnt that a mine laying party had come and that there was no officer with them. It is my impression that had the enemy been determined, then C Company would have suffered a minimum of 25 per cent casualties that night.

It is said, 'Luck favours certain commanders in battle.' That is exactly what happened on this mission. Otherwise, as Major I.S. Chema, our battalion second-in-command (2iC) told me later, they had calculated a minimum of 20-25 per cent casualties, including the company commander. They were thinking about who would replace me, and where would they get reinforcements for the company.

The men dug frantically throughout the night. They made extensive use of Dahs. Pine trees with girths of 5-7 feet were chopped and used for overhead protection. It was a treat to watch the men comfortably settled in their *morchas*, when I went around, before first light. The Pioneer platoon personnel had completed the mine laying well in time. The Reorganisation Group under Captain Pramod Kumar performed a magnificent job, with timely supply of all essential stores and, subsequently, foodstuff on all the days. The mines, which the enemy had laid on the features, were cordoned off with barbed wire fencing, on the same night. All personnel were warned not to go on the flat top. The next day these were taken out, a total of 158, anti-personnel mines were recovered. Forty-five of these were laid by us, in front of our own FDLs, facing the enemy and the rest were sent to the Brigade HQ.

It is difficult to say why the enemy did not pound Ring Contour with artillery fire on the night of 3 December. On 4, 5, 6 December night, the enemy brought down very accurate artillery fire, in the centre of the feature. Fortunately, for us there were no defences dug, where they brought down maximum concentration of fire. On both 5 and 6 December night, they resorted to airbursts. But by then the company was well dug in and prepared for all eventualities. Protective patrols had been positioned on all likely approaches of the enemy. On the evening of 4 December, the CO informed me that he had received information from HQ, that a concentration of 500 pathans had been reported in the vicinity of Kopra Lambawala, a Pakistani piquet and their counterattack was expected that night. I assured him that the company was fully prepared to meet any contingency. But the assault did not come. Similar information was received on 5 December, but again nothing happened. In any case, I had ordered the boys to man the trenches, throughout the night and rest during the day.

On 5 December, the battalion 2iC, Major I.S. Cheema, and RMO Capt. T.J. Willy, arrived at my command post with a packet of sweets. Major I.S. Cheema and Capt. T.J. Willy congratulated me and informed that our achievement had been announced over All India Radio, in its news bulletin of 1800 hours on 4 December 1971.

This was the first gain in the entire division sector. He said that my citation for the gallantry award was ready for dispatch. But it never materialized due to the red tap in staff channels.

On 5-6 December night, we lost Naib Subedar Radha Mohan Singha, the 7 platoon commander, due to enemy shelling. He had come that evening for my briefing, at my command post. That was the last time I saw him alive. The enemy carried out intense shelling of the piquet that night. In the morning, when I was going towards the 7 platoon area, I saw someone lying in crouched position near a bush, and a sten gun, lying a few yards away. I shouted for someone to come forward. When the body was turned over, it was that of the JCO. The dead body was sent to base immediately and cremated according to Hindu rites, in the presence of Subedar Major and Panditji. What an irony of fate that this JCO was proceeding on posting to

NCC on compassionate grounds. He had even drawn money for the purpose, but was held up as the war started.

On 7 December evening, I briefed Major S. Kipgen, SM, OC D Company, regarding the enemy deployment and activities on my frontage, *Capture of Ring Contour* as he had to lead a patrol to probe enemy defences of Sawanpathr-1. His return route was via my picquet. But suddenly, at 2300 hours, he came under fire from enemy MMGs and simultaneously 2 inch mortars and 81 mm mortars also opened up. The enemy was lighting up the area. I could distinctly see the enemy MMGs, spitting fire. Major Kipgen asked for artillery fire to extricate his patrol, but not realizing the gravity of the situation and to conserve artillery ammunition, his request was denied. I hurriedly had consultations with Captain N.K. Dawar, my FOO, and he immediately brought his guns into action. I was constantly in touch with Major Kipgen. He had fixed up certain reference points to guide him to my area. The last landmark to which I guided him was the post of my protective patrol, which he had seen while going out. But unfortunately, he climbed up a slope, which led him into the minefield. His radio operator was the first to be injured. He informed me about it and I told him to stay still, as I was sending Havildar Hanishow Mao, as he knew every inch of the ground in the minefield. But out of sympathy for his operator, who was crying, he took a step forward to lift him and in the bargain his left foot was blown off. He was then evacuated to the rear. An excellent officer wasted because of the vagaries of war.

Throughout the war, there wasn't a dull moment. Everyday, information would be received about enemy concentration that were stationed behind the Sank complex for a counterattack on my locality. But it never came through until the ceasefire on 17 December 1971. During the war, the GOC, Major General E. D'Souza, and Brigadier K.K. Nanda visited the battalion-defended area on 10 December, and came right up to the new picquet, captured by my company across the Cease Fire Line (CFL). This was subsequently named as Rhino picquet, and continues to be known by that name. The GOC and the brigade commander were happy, as their desire had been fulfilled. They were very impressed with the high morale and the

excellent performance of the men. The Army Commander, Lieutenant General K.P. Candeth, visited the battalion on 5 January 1972 and appreciated our performance during the war.

One aspect of this operation constantly perplexed to me. There is a well-established procedure for issuing orders for a mission – battalion commanders are allotted the task by the higher commander, and it is the prerogative of the Commanding Officer to detail the officer or the sub unit, who will execute the given task. But in this case, the GOC had dictated to the CO my name and why he wanted me to accomplish this task. In order to satisfy my query the CO clarified, ‘You remember that you had carried out one month’s intensive training, with 3 JCOs and 99 OR at the Division Counter Infiltration School. The performance of your company in the final exercise was extremely impressive and was adjudged the best in the 19 Infantry Division, in the courses run during 1970-71. Therefore, your name was well-known to both the GOC and the Commander. Hence, the suggestion from them was but natural.’

The most outstanding feature of this operation was that we were able to establish our moral ascendancy over the Pakistani forces, through our initiative at the very beginning of the war. We sustained it by adopting an offensive posture, and by carrying out incessant aggressive patrolling on our frontage. Since C Company had established a tactical base, by capturing Ring Contour, a series of daring patrols led by officers, JCOs, and NCOs were sent across the CFL, from here. My responsibility was to brief the patrol leaders about the enemy deployment opposite us, as relevant to them. All these patrols did a marvellous job, by drawing enemy fire, they managed to locate the exact position of enemy automatics. Two long-range patrols led by Second Lieutenant Bir Singh were sent behind enemy lines. He brought back useful information about enemy movements. The enemy appeared to be shy of patrolling and was content with laying out a screen of ambushes, just in front of their own piquets. My PPs and LPs ambushes were so positioned that no enemy could sneak in. The cumulative effect of all these actions was that the enemy dared not launch a counterattack on my locality.

The unit was 'Blooded' for the first time, since its raising and the battalion came up to the expectations of the higher commanders. The morale of the men was very high and their introduction to battle did plenty of good to the unit, transforming it into a well-knit team. Everyone was very responsive. Ours was the only unit in the brigade to secure any real estate across the CFL and to obtain identification too.

I have witnessed as well as read a lot about the noisy attack, but seldom came across an example of a silent attack. This operation was a classic example of a stealthy assault. I, too, had my reservations and thought that at some stage it is bound to be converted into a noisy attack, but it did not. Plenty of practice and rehearsals had gone into it, especially during the five days before the start of the war, as mentioned earlier. It paid the desired dividends. I was bewildered to find myself on top of the feature, without firing a bullet, though the FOO kept pestering me often to allow him to bring down artillery fire to soften up the objective. There was a platoon plus strength of the enemy on the feature, but all fled with lightning speed before my eyes, without offering any resistance. When I conveyed the news of my success to my CO, his joy knew no bounds. A wave of happiness travelled up to the division commander, and the Govt of India announced it on All India Radio.

PART – 4

The Air War

MEMOIRS OF 6 DECEMBER 1971

AIR COMMODORE ASHOK P. SHINDE, VRC, VM

Third December 1971 was an unforgettable day for us. That was the day when the long anticipated Indo-Pak war commenced, with Pakistan Air Force warplanes attacking six of our forward airfields in the Western Sector, at about 5 p.m. I was the Flight Commander 'B' Flight, with No.101 Squadron, commanded by Wing Commander K.C. Khanna. The squadron was equipped with Sukhoi-7 fighter bombers, and based at Air Force Station Adampur, which was commanded by Air Commodore Randhir Singh. Our role was to support the forward operational units of XV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Sartaj Singh, GM in particular 191 Brigade who were defending the Chamb-Jaurian sector, adjacent to the river Munawar Tavi.

Third December was special in another way, it was my birthday. My wife, Anuradha, was baking a cake for me in an electric oven, when the entire power at the Air Force station was shut off and the general recall siren started blaring. Knowing that the much awaited moment had come, I rushed off to the Base Ops. Room for further orders, asking my wife to get into the trench, dug up in the garden of my residence, along with my sons, Abhijit aged four and Satyajit aged two years, and to keep doing so whenever the alert siren blared thereafter. When I returned home at about 10 p.m. that night, I found my wife and the children were still in the trench,

with blankets and pillows. She said that she did not want to wake up the children and then have to run to the trench each time the siren went off. She felt sorry that the war had to begin on my birthday, as she could not even bake a cake for me.

I exclaimed, 'This is a grand gift that the President of Pakistan General Yahya Khan had given to me on my birthday....'

When I decided to sleep inside the house, she suggested that there was enough place for me in the trench. I told her that I wanted to sleep inside, since I needed a good night's rest before the early morning missions planned for the next day. At about 2 a.m., she woke me up to tell that she had just heard on the transistor radio, which she had with her in the trench that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had just addressed the nation, declaring war against the aggressor, Pakistan. I laughed and told her that I had known that the war had commenced when the first red alert had sounded! Anuradha and the kids left for Delhi that morning with our neighbour, who was driving to to the capital with her kids. So now I was a free bird, without having to worry about the safety of having my family in the war zone.

The operation code name for the entire war was Operation Cactus Lily which began with full gusto on 4 December, the day on which I flew three search and destroy missions in the Chamb Sector. On 5 December, after I had flown one mission, the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) called me late that evening to the Ops Room and informed me that he would be sending me on an important mission on 6 December, early in the morning. He would brief me before takeoff, and advised me to get some rest. I reported to him early that morning, when it was still dark. He told me General Sartaj had informed him that it had become practically impossible for our troops to cross the Munawar Tavi, because of the incessant and intense firing of heavy artillery guns from Pakistan. The fire seemed to be coming from somewhere close to the border; however, our forward regiments could not locate the exact position of the guns. My task was to first search for and locate these seemingly well-camouflaged guns, and then destroy them. I told the AOC that since I would be spending considerable time in the Chamb Sector until I located the guns and did my task, I would need to get

the escorts to take care of the Mirage III Interceptors, operating from the nearby airbase in Pakistan. The AOC rang up Group Captain Baba Katre, and asked Air Force Station Pathankot to arrange for the MiG 21 escorts. I went to the Squadron and told the EO that I wanted two aircraft loaded with a mix of SAP/HE 68 mm Sneb rockets with all the four external pods and also 30 mm gun shells. Flying Officer Rajan Wahi chose to come with me, as my number 2. Rajan was engaged, and his marriage which had been planned for the first week of December had to be postponed due to the war. We hurried to our aircraft in my jeep and after we dropped Rajan to his aircraft in the covered pen, I was dropped to my Toofani Aircraft, Cowl No. 830. In the early light of dawn, I took off as code name 'Saturn-1', turning towards Pathankot and Rajan as 'Saturn-2', joined me in his tactical position, to my starboard (right), at low level. As we neared Pathankot airfield, I called up the Pathankot Tower to inform the escorts to line up. As we were about to fly close to the west side of the runway, I saw MiG I rolling forward on the runway. MiG II, however, had to abort the take off, he radioed to say that his aircraft was unserviceable due some snag that had developed at the take-off point. I instructed the MiG I to go back, since a single escort could not give us the requisite cover.

Rajan asked me, 'Sir, what do we do now?'

'Of course, we complete our mission even without the escorts.'

I called up on the radio and informed them that we had decided to proceed, giving out that famous Maratha war cry of Maharaja Shivaji, '*Harr Harr Mahadev...*'

The AOC Adampur, Air Commodore Randhir Singh, had left the choice to me to abort mission, in case the escorts fail to join up. However, as the leader of the mission, the urgent need to seek and destroy the artillery guns of the enemy was the my only priority. We were flying low, at practically treetop height, to avoid detection by enemy radar. We had to change our direction often on the way to avoid our own Class 'A' Gun Firing Area (GFA), protected by our anti-aircraft guns, placed around our own vital areas, e.g. radars, bomb dumps, and airfields around Jammu and close to the Chamb Sector.

We entered the Chamb sector and after crossing the Munawar Tawi river, flew south-southwest. While I was busy doing an intense search of the terrain, my wingman, Rajan Wahi, was busy looking around and scanning the sky for enemy aircraft. In the process, I came across a high ground—a small hill like feature—with a village situated at the top, which I identified as a place called Barrilla, as marked on my one-inch scale map, which happened to be about 15-odd kilometres from our border and the river. I flew around the village. The morning sun had come up above the horizon in the east, a slight haze prevailed in the atmosphere. As I circled around the village, I was surprised by the complete lack of movement below, very unlike the normal reaction in hamlets, where the civilian population runs out to look at the thundering jets above, out of curiosity! Therefore, I decided to go around a second time and noticed something unusual; the thatched huts seemed rather newly constructed. It occurred to me that maybe the Pakistan artillery unit had forced the residents of the village to vacate, and installed their guns, well-hidden and camouflaged, inside these huts. So I positioned myself and gave a small burst of Sneb Rockets out of curiosity, telling Rajan to keep a sharp look out for enemy interceptors. Then, I turned on the master armament switch, on my front instrument panel and dived, aiming for the huts that were close to the edge of the high ground, and fired. I saw the rockets heading straight towards the intended target and hitting the first two huts on the edge, as planned. The huts crumbled down exposing two artillery guns sticking out. The rockets must have hit the store of live ammunition, since there were explosions and fire. Now, the troops started firing at me. I radioed Ranjan, ‘Tally Ho’, implying that contact had been made with the target, and told him to follow a ‘Circle of Joy’, follow me and carry out the attacks. In our euphoria, we carried out a number of rocket attacks. When the rocket pods were empty, I switched over to firing the 30 mm guns and pumping bullets into this exploding conflagration, destroyed practically all the artillery guns located at Barilla village.

As I was pulling out of my last dive, Rajan shouted over the radio, ‘Hurray, our MiG escorts have arrived.’

I looked up and spotted two Mirages flying right above us, from the opposite direction. I identified these as enemy aircraft and warned Rajan. Rajan in his excitement saw these as MiGs, whereas actually these were Mirage III with Delta Wings, minus the tail plane that our MiG 21s have. Only experienced eyes would spot this difference! So telling Rajan to cut corners and join up in low level tactical formation, I ducked down to treetop level and headed towards Jammu. I told Rajan to stay ahead of me, because I saw these planes turning in to follow us and since Mirages are faster and superior performance aircraft, I well knew that our only chance of survival lay in flying at low levels. As soon as we entered Indian territory, the Mirages had caught up with us and were firing at us with their guns, I saw the bullets racing above me and raking the ground below and ahead of me. I knew that the ideal position for shooting down an aircraft is from below and this was impossible for the enemy, since I was already flying at treetop level. Now, the next problem was the anti-aircraft guns of Jammu airfield that was coming up ahead. I couldn't execute a turn sideways to avoid fire from our own AA guns, because that would make me vulnerable to an attack from the Mirages. Hoping that the friendly Indian anti-aircraft guns would not shoot us down, I decided to push through the flak fire ahead of me. I was lucky, but Rajan was not, as he was hit by a friendly round. His rear fuselage began emitting smoke, indicating that his aircraft was on fire! As we crossed the Jammu airfield area safely, I ordered Rajan to pull up and eject out of the burning aircraft. I saw him pull up steeply and eject as. I whizzed past ahead. Now both the Mirages were firing at me. I could not jettison my external fuel tanks and the rocket pods, since some technician in our squadron had tied up the Emergency Jettison Switch on the instrument panel with thick wire, to prevent accidental jettisoning! It was very difficult to fly at treetop level with the left hand and operate this switch with the right hand, which was bleeding due to nicks and scratches. Once I had successfully jettisoned the external load, the aircraft pitched upwards towards the sky due to the sudden change in the centre of gravity. I could now really pick up speed. I was running out of fuel and decided to head for Pathankot, telling them to direct the Combat Air Petrol (CAP) aircraft, if

any, towards me to take care of the Mirages following me. At this juncture, the enemy aircraft turned back towards Pakistan. Now I called, 'May day, May day', on the radio and requested for a direct approach and landing from the south, keeping the runway clear of other aircraft. I spotted Pathankot and heaved a sigh of relief and carried out a straight approach lowering my under carriage. The fuel gauge was showing empty, accompanied by all sorts of audio warnings. Even before I flared out on the touchdown area on the runway, the engine started coughing and winding down on its own. I landed on the runway with the satisfaction of having made it safely back to base. When I tried to find out about Flying Officer Rajan Wahi, I learned that our own ground troops had picked him up and taken him to the hospital, in a serious condition. Then, later in the day I was informed that he had passed away in an unconscious state, due to severe head injuries. Later, after scrutinizing his Form-700, I realized that Rajan's ejection seat position in that aircraft was fixed at the highest position, No. 1, whereas his correct position should have been at the lower position of No. 2. A precious life was lost due to this mistake.

The AOC from Adampur offered me his congratulations, and also relayed a congratulations message from General Sartaj. I stayed overnight at Pathankot and after my aircraft was serviced and made ready, I flew it back to Adampur on 7 December to fly one more operational sortie and thereafter continued flying until the cease fire was declared on 17 evening. Only then did I call up my wife in Delhi, who was staying with her brother, who was serving as an engineer with HQ Western Air Command.

I was posted to Iraq from 1980 to 1982, at an air base called Al Kuth, in Kazakhstan. Sometime in February 1982, an air force friend posted to Baghdad, on a similar training mission, rang up to tell me that there was a Pakistani pilot posted near Bagdad on a training mission, who wanted to meet me as he had also flown in the 1971 Indo-Pak War, in a Mirage aircraft on their Eastern (our Western) border. When I had chance to visit Baghdad, I called up my friend to arrange our meeting at his house and asked him to invite the Pakistani pilot too. We met in the evening as planned, and over a drink, we started our conversation.

He asked, ‘Which aircraft were you flying during the war of 1971? I replied that I flew a Sukhoi-7 aircraft. He wanted to know about the morning of 6 December, where I was flying and on what mission. I told him that I was tasked with destroying the long range artillery guns positioned south of the Munawar Tavi river, which was preventing our troops from advancing. I then told him about how I identified these guns hidden in Bareilla village, situated at a high ground, overlooking the river. It was during our attacks, when we had practically destroyed all the guns and the ammunition dump, when two Mirage aircraft intercepted us. Since we had emptied all our ammunition in the euphoria of destroying this target, we were not left with any to defend ourselves in a dogfight. So we were flying very low, at treetop level, to save ourselves from the Mirage aircraft that were firing at us. As I continued further, he told me to halt and continued the story further himself, narrating it upto the moment they left us. He then got up, embraced me, and told me that he was the leader of the Mirage aircraft. He was very impressed with my low flying ability, and now took the opportunity to praise me.

I then said, ‘Well, we met in the war as enemies, but I am glad that today we are meeting as friends. Well, What a rare coincidence, perhaps planned by God!’

I then inquired about what he would be doing after his tenure in Iraq.

He said, ‘To tell you the truth, my mother is Christian. As such, I do not have any future in my country, which is being controlled by orthodox Muslims. Hence, I have planned to scoot off to the UK and stay with my aunt. I plan to stay there permanently, which is possible since I am not yet married. I am fully aware of the consequences of running away from my country and the Pakistan Air Force—an act which amounts to desertion.’

Then I laughed, and said, ‘Well, why are you telling this secret to me, your so called enemy?’

He laughed and said, ‘Well, that is why I am telling you; surely I would not have told you if you were Pakistani!’

We never met thereafter. I wonder if he is still in UK?

Maybe we shall meet someday again in the future!

NIGHT BOMBING OF DHAKA

AIR COMMODORE MANBIR SINGH, VRC, VM

During the 1971 Indo-Pak War, I was operating from Guwahati with the No. 28 Squadron, which was equipped with MiG-21FL aircraft. The war had started on the 3 December. The pilots of No. 28 and No. 4 Squadrons, operating out of Guwahati, had put the runways at Tezgaon and Kurmitola, in Dhaka, out of action.

On the night of 7 December, at about 2000 hours, I was having a drink in the mess bar with other squadron pilots, when an officer came in and told me that the Squadron Commander, Wing Commander B.K. Bishnoi, wanted to see me in the restroom. There, I saw Wing Commander Bishnoi, and the Operations Commander, Group Captain M.S.D. Wollen having a drink. I saluted and stood at the doorway. I was asked to come in and told that I was to go on a mission, to bomb the Tezgaon airfield, in Dhaka, early in the morning. I was instructed not to have any more hard drinks, have an early dinner, and sleep in the Air Crew room, near the Squadron Headquarters.

After my dinner, I went to the Squadron Headquarters and told the ground staff to have an aircraft ready and loaded with bombs at 0200 hours, for the mission. I woke up to the alarm I had set for 0200 hours, on 8 December, and washed my face. I had gone to sleep in my flying suit. I put on my flying boots, picked up my helmet and walked to the aircraft. It was a cold morning, with the mist reducing visibility. I could barely see a few

yards ahead of me. I reached the aircraft and there I was greeted by the ground crew. They told me that the plane was ready for the mission. I walked around the aircraft to check if all external systems were OK and that the bombs had been loaded properly. After that, I got into the cockpit and strapped myself in to the ejection seat. I then put on my helmet and mask.

I put on the aircraft radio and asked the control tower for permission to start the aircraft. On getting permission, I started up the aircraft, carrying out the mandatory checks, and taxied out to the runway for take-off. When I lined up on the runway, I could not see the runway lights beyond a 100 yards, due to the mist. I wondered whether all the runways light were on. Upon enquiry, the controller told me that all the lights were on. I then put on the after burner and released the brakes. The aircraft began to accelerate and as it rolled forward I kept it on the white line that marks the centre of the runway, with the help of the landing light. I kept seeing the runway lights coming up, as the aircraft accelerated to take off speed. As I took off and reached a height of about 100 meters, it suddenly became clear. I could see the stars in the sky above, the half-moon in the eastern part of the sky, and the hilltops to the south. I turned south towards Dhaka and levelled off at about 200 metres, above the hills.

I headed for the initial point (IP), which was a road and rail bridge over a river at Ghorashal. As I cleared the Shillong hills, near Cherrapunji, I descended to the plains of East Pakistan, flying at 100 metres height and at a speed of 900 kmph. As the pressure altimeter was reading less than zero, I had to maintain the height with the help of the radio altimeter. I could see the ground, which was covered with mist, and the rivers that shone in the moon light. As I reached close to Ghorashal, I could see the two bridges over the river loom large before me. Over the bridges, I turned right and headed for Tezgoan airfield. Short of the airfield, I pulled up to a height of 3,000 metres and looked for the Tezgaon runway. After an orbit, I spotted the runway. Kurmitola runway was clearly visible in the moon light, as it was not camouflaged. Tezgoan runway was camouflaged and, therefore, a little more difficult to spot. I positioned myself in the correct place for an

attack from north to south, along the runway, and armed the bombs, before I entered into a 45 degree dive.

Once the centre of the runway was in sight, and I had reached a height of 1,000 metres, I released the bombs. As I pulled out of the dive and turned hard left and upwards, I saw the bombs exploding on the runway and the anti-aircraft gun firing. It looked beautiful, like the fireworks display during the closing ceremony of the Olympics. I was safe, as there was no air opposition, so I turned back to return to Guwahati. During the approach to the runway, I could see it clearly but as soon as I reached a height of 100 metres and below, I encountered mist and the visibility dropped to a few 100 metres. However, I managed to land safely and taxied to my allotted pen at 0412 hours.

I flew a similar mission on the morning of 9 December. I took off at 0320 hours, and landed back at 0410 hours. Again, the anti-aircraft guns at Tezgoan opened fire after I had dropped the bombs and cleared the airfield. Once again there was no air opposition and I came back safe and sound.

On the night of 11 December, my Squadron Commander briefed me to go on a mission to locate a ghost runway, 30 kms east of Tezgaon airfield. This runway had been laid out temporarily to evacuate VIPs from the country. Flight Lieutenant H. Sardesai of No. 4 Squadron had spotted this runway and fired his K-13 missiles at it. I was airborne for the mission at 0350 hours, and headed towards the target. On reaching, I climbed up to 5,000 metres and orbited over the area to locate the ghost runway. I even took the help of the radar at Shillong, but could not locate it, as the enemy had put off the runway lights. I asked the radar to vector me to Tezgoan airfield. As the radar guided me to the airfield, I spotted the airfield and carried out a steep glide bombing attack. However, this time, the bombs did not explode. I returned to Guwahati and landed safely at 0440 hours.

WISH I HAD A GUN

AIR COMMODORE MANBIR SINGH, VRC, VM

On 3 December 1971, No. 28 Squadron, then stationed at Tezpur, got orders to move to Guwahati. All serviceable MiG-21 aircraft, that made up the full strength of the squadron, were flown by night to Guwahati, from where the squadron was to take part in the 1971 Indo-Pak War in the Eastern Sector.

On 4 December 1971, I was detailed to escort a strike mission of four aircraft, equipped with 57 mm rockets, led by the Squadron Commander, Wing Commander B.K. Bishnoi (Bhoop). My number two for the mission was Flight Lieutenant D. Subiya (Dadoo). Our aircraft were equipped with two K-13 infrared homing missiles, one under each wing, and a single long-range fuel drop tank, under the belly of the aircraft. The strike mission's task was to attack enemy aircraft and installations at the Tezgaon airfield, in Dhaka. The strike formation took off at 0645 hrs. My number two and I took off, behind the strike formation. We flew south from Guwahati, towards Dhaka over the Garo and Khasi hills, at about 300 feet off the ground, to avoid being picked up by the enemy radar. We skimmed over the green hilltops and very soon entered East Pakistan, at the foothills, near Cheerapunji and descended down to the plains.

We were now flying very low at 900 kmph, over green paddy fields, covered with morning winter mist. I could only hear the hum of my jet

engine. My head was moving from left to right, looking out for enemy aircraft that might have been scrambled to intercept our formation by the air defence control at Dhaka. This was my first mission into enemy territory and while it seemed to me as though I was on a regular training mission, my senses were alert as never before. No thoughts went through my head, except those concerning the mission at hand.

A few kilometres short of the Tezgaon airfield, Dadoo and I pulled up to a height of 1,000 meters and continued to clear the tail of the strike formation. When the Tezgaon airfield was in sight, I heard the strike leader call out to me on the radio, Buzzy, *badmash* (code name for enemy aircraft) are taking off. At this time, the strike aircraft were in a dive to fire their rockets on the targets at the Tezgaon airfield. I saw the enemy aircraft, an F-86 Sabre jet, taking off in a southerly direction on runway 18. At that time in 1971, the MiG-21FL could carry only two Russian K-13 infrared homing missiles, or a 30 mm gun gondola in place of the fuel drop tank. For this mission, we had to carry a fuel drop tank, as the distance to the target from Guwahati was beyond the flying range of the MiG.

Flying at over 1,000 kmph, I immediately started to descend as the enemy aircraft was lower than me. I did not drop my empty fuel tank to improve the manoeuvrability of the aircraft, as I was already at a much higher speed than the Sabre. At this very moment, I heard Dadoo call out over the radio that he had another Sabre in sight and he was getting ready to jettison his fuel drop tank to engage the enemy. I got behind the F-86 and when within range, I fired my first K-13 missile at him. I saw that the missile, instead of hitting the Sabre had turned left and headed for the sun, which was to the left of the target aircraft. The K-13 being an infrared homing missile, will lock on to a heat source that is greater. In this case, it happened to be the sun. I immediately launched the second missile. This one overshot the Sabre and exploded in front of it. The enemy aircraft escaped unscathed. After attaining a height of about 200 meters, it started to turn hard right. Although, I had no more weapons on my aircraft, I continued to trail the Sabre, lest he go after the strike formation. During this time, my number 2, Dadoo, tried to get behind the second Sabre, which had

passed under me during my attack on the Sabre which had been taking off. He jettisoned his drop tank and with full afterburner on, he went in for the kill. His speed was too high and the Sabre was turning hard. He could not stay behind the Sabre and over shot it.

After over shooting, he lost contact with it and called me to say that he was setting course back to base. I had turned right through 270 degrees behind the Sabre, when, 'Bhoop', the strike leader called to say that his formation had finished their attacks on the airfield and were setting course for base. At this stage, I left the Sabre and turned left to head northwards to Guwahati.

I called out for my number 2, 'Dadoo, what is your position.'

He said he was heading back for base, 1,000 meters off the ground. I saw a rail line going east-west. I asked Dadoo to let me know when he was crossing the rail line. It is easy to spot an aircraft along a rail line or a river. When I received a call from Dadoo indicating that he was crossing the rail line, I looked along it, from left to right, and spotted Dadoo's aircraft to my right, about 2,000 meters away, low and slightly ahead of me. As I came in level with Dadoo's aircraft, at about 1,000 meters, I saw a Sabre aircraft at about 800 meters behind him. He was coming within firing range; I shouted to him to turn hard left, to get the Sabre off his tail and let me engage it. He reduced power to help me to catch up with him, and went into full afterburner regime and commenced the hard turn.

The aircraft engine takes a few seconds to develop full power. Dadoo's aircraft started to lose speed rapidly before he could get full power. The Sabre that was trying to shoot him down could not stay behind Dadoo's aircraft and thus over shot him on his right. I ordered Dadoo to reverse turn to the right and pick up the Sabre, which was at one o'clock and only about 4,000 meters in front of him. Dadoo sighted the Sabre, we got on his tail. I could be of no further assistance to him, since I had no missiles or any other weapon I left it to Dadoo to shoot down the Sabre or defend himself. I left the area of combat and headed north towards base. After a few minutes, I called Dadoo to ask him how he was. However, when I got no reply to my first few calls, I became worried for his safety. Suddenly, Dadoo called and

said he was alright. He had left the Sabre and was heading north towards base. He could not shoot down the enemy, as he was too close behind him during combat. There is a minimum distance and speed the pilot has to maintain to be able to launch a K-13 missile, Dadoo could not achieve the required parameters for a launch and since he was running out of fuel, he disengaged. I asked him for his height. He said that he was at 100 meters and that he had only 500 liters of fuel left. I ordered him to climb to 6,000 meters to save fuel. I also asked the strike leader to inform the air traffic control to have the rescue helicopter airborne, in case Dadoo had to eject due to lack of fuel. I climbed to 9,000 meters and started to fly for endurance. I came over the Guwahati airfield and started to orbit it. As the leader of the escort mission, I did not want to land before my No. 2. I told Dadoo to keep flying at 6,000 meters until he saw the runway, and then glide to reach it. Dadoo did what he was told. On the final approach for landing, he said that he had only 80 liters of fuel left. After landing, at the end of the runway he called to say that his engine had flamed out. I told him not to stop on the runway, as I had to land. He kept rolling and turned off the runway at the end onto a taxi track. On that track, there was an aircraft pen to Dadoo's left, where I asked him to turn into. He turned left into the pen and came to stop, just outside it. I landed after this and taxied to my allotted pen.

FTW VAMPIRES No. 121 SQUADRON IN 1971 WAR THE UNTOLD STORY

WING COMMANDER W.H. MARSHALL

The role of Fighter Training Wing Vampires designated to No. 121 Squadron (ad hoc), although little known, is unique in the annals of the 1971 War. Devoid of the glamour of a fighter squadron, these venerable aircraft were relegated to a night interdiction role, and tasked with the bombing of the road and rail supply lines, on Pakistan's western war front. In war, the measure of pilot's success lies in the execution, skill, and courage of the aircrew, however, considering that the Vampire was not designed for this role and that the crews lacked sufficient night flying training experience, it was a case of using operational sorties for on-the-job training!

The operational role for the FTW was photo-reconnaissance. For this purpose, two T11 trainers were fitted with F24 cameras and training sorties carried out, with hilarious consequences as the targets selected were bathing ghats!

In early July, while we were deputed in Srinagar, the role was changed to ground attack in close support of the army in Kashmir. To understand the critical factors with regard to targets and tactics, I carried out a ground, or

Line of Control, survey by boot, mule, and helicopter, from Pir Panjal to Leh. The armament proposed was napalm for avalanches, to render useless roads and bridges in narrow valleys by bombing the mountainsides. Practice flying in this new role commenced and as no slot was available in Jamnagar, range practice was carried out clandestinely on the army range near Secunderabad, using old Hunter drop tanks filled with water for napalm practice. An advance party with T10 rockets, high explosive 20 mm ammunition and bomb trolleys was dispatched to Srinagar. One needs to remember that all Vampires in Hakimpet were used for training purpose. Actually, the Vampires had not been used for armament work in years.

We received the signal that the war was on ‘Tally Ho!’, along with our operation order to move to Srinagar. There was much excitement on the tarmac when we took off in a formation of four Vampire 52s and one trainer T55, on 10 November 1971, with a refuelling halt at Kanpur.

Then it hit us! As they had no blast pens for us, we were denied flight clearance to Srinagar. Our dilemma was short lived, as orders were soon received to proceed to Chandigarh and await further instructions. Further chaos, because at such short notice, there were no ground crews to service the aircraft on arrival at Chandigarh. The next day, our operation order was again amended. Our new role was low-level night interdiction of road and rail lines of communication and fuel storage dumps/tanks, etc., our base would be at Halwara.

It was a tall order! Most of us had not flown at night for ages. The last time I flew at night was in February 1965, as a Canberra bomber pilot. During the war in 1965, I had considerable night flying experience with several hi-lo-hi raids on Sargodha and other airfields. No time was wasted in commencing night conversion and low-level cross-country flights. However, it soon became apparent that the single seat Vampire 52 was unsuitable for this role. Apart from its single, very high frequency radio/telephony (VHF R/T) set, and its lack of an ejection seat, navigation was difficult as cockpit lighting was poor and the compass located behind the stick was hard to read, making low-level navigation very difficult. Map reading was out of the question and DR navigation was the only option,

besides accurate course steering. Apart from the spatial disorientation of a dark night and unlit targets, gear for the release of armaments was also a problem.

Therefore, it was felt that the two seater Vampire 55/T11 with ejection seats, would be a better option with one pilot flying and the other crew member incharge of navigation, armament release, and calling out the height in the dive and the pull out height.

I approached the Station Commander for authority to change the aircraft type, but was met with a veiled hint that the request would be detrimental to me. Fortunately, the Commander in Chief Western Air Command, Air Marshal M. Engineer, was visiting the station. Since he had been my Station Commander at Pune, in 1953, when I was flying Tempests, I requested for an interview, which was granted. The request was met with instant approval if the T55s could be spared. Needless to add, they were spared and the changeover took place on 3 and 4 December 1971, just in time, as we ferried to Halwara, on 9 December!

However, the aircraft had two critical problems that needed to be resolved. The aircraft clock, a small Smith's eight-day clock was unsuitable. Remembering that the IL-14 had been made obsolete, we borrowed their clocks. With a 4-inch dial face sweep, a centre second hand and two stop watch independent dials, it was a masterpiece for navigation. The second problem was 'set course' point. As Halwara was a forward base, immediately after take-off, the runway lights were switched off. The only other 'set course' point was the GT Road and the canal. This was hard to locate at night, as 'black out' was strictly enforced and there were no cars using headlights on the road. Ingeniously, we discovered that if we flew low enough, we could see the red tail-lights of vehicles and the glint from the canal did the rest. Since landing lights were not allowed and with no taxi light, it was difficult to taxi. So, a hole was cut in the nose wheel door and an automobile light installed and the T55s now had a taxi light. Some degree of malfunction was observed, as the compasses had to be tampered with, and had to be subjected to compass swings.

The raids that we carried out, were in pitch darkness on a silent airfield, with just static in the earphones and the glow of the instrument panel. The take-offs were somewhat ‘touch and go’, as we were over-loaded with both front guns full of ammunition and rocket pods. Fortunately, the long runway helped, but it kept one guessing. Sporadic tracers and gun flashes always marked crossing into enemy territory. I wondered whom they were firing at? Blurred images just flashed by. The attacks on railway stations and junctions was an ‘Instrument Flying Exercise’, as it was necessary to concentrate on instruments, from pull up to weapon delivery, if one was not to fly into the target. Distraction, or curiosity about results, could mean disaster. Ricochets were also a danger, if one went too low. One of my recollections was surprise at seeing the red outer signals of the railway yards or stations, when pulling out of a weapons delivery attack. The darkest hour in the total blackout, was the return leg, where the guiding life line was the radio and the friendly ATC voice above the static, a huge relief. One heaved a sign of relief on seeing the runway lights spring up in the darkness, when the ATC became aware that we were coming in to land.

One of the transcripts of the Operations Book or War Book says it all. During a mission, we had attacked a train at dusk. Later during briefing, No. 222 Squadron (Sukhois), who had returned from a dawn raid, reported that the train was missing. Obviously, the train had been repaired overnight. This gave us a target, and though we probably did no substantial damage, as repairs were so delayed, the Sukhois found that the war train still stranded and finished off the job.

In conclusion, it must be appreciated that, this time around, the Air Force was pro-active in its preparation for the war in 1971. Training aircraft are generally the last brick to throw at the enemy, if at all. Whatever the reason, it gave the Vampires an opportunity to avenge their 1965 war massacre, and to live up to their nocturnal name – Vampires!

As a postscript, little recognition is given to the courage of families, particularly wives of aircrew engaged in active operations. The women had to endure the uncertainty of their husband’s whereabouts, while putting up a

brave front, and encouraging juniors, in the face of their own fears, while their husbands carried out their missions and treated their tasks as routine.

PHOTO MISSION OVER TANGAIL

GROUP CAPTAIN N.G. JUNNARKAR, VRC

In the Indo-Pak War of 1971, my Officer Commanding, Wing Commander Ramesh Benegal, and I carried out the initial operations – flying photo missions, from 106 Squadron. We had been involved in operations in what was then East Pakistan, since April 1971. We carried out a few covert photo missions to cover some of the airfields of East Pakistan, like Khulna and Jessore. Our final photo mission, however, was to provide information to the Army, which was planning a para drop in the Tangail Sector, for the capture of Dhaka.

On 2 December 1971, around mid-day, my Commanding Officer called Rajwar and I, and asked us to prepare to go to the East. We proceeded to Guwahati, from where we were whisked off to Shillong at dusk. Eastern Air Command was buzzing with activity, and I learned that Pakistan had committed an act of war, by attacking our airfields in the Northern and Western Command. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi responded with a declaration of war. The initial briefing for our missions was done with Wing Commander Benegal, at HQ Eastern Command, Fort William, some days earlier.

At Shillong, we were briefed about the target area to be photographed in the privacy of SASO's house. I quickly planned the mission with a take-off from Guwahati at daybreak, at the first available opportunity. We took off in

a Chetak at about 2230 hours. The way in which the chopper pilot did that sortie was nothing short of amazing. When we approached the airfield, it was engulfed in a thick fog. I still wonder at the kind of nerves of steel that he had to make a perfect landing, the emergency, runway lighting, in that black out condition!

I grabbed a few hours of rest at the Officer's Mess and then returned to our aircraft. To get clear pictures, without shadows, we needed the sun to be at least thirty degrees and above. Hence, 'Time over Target' was planned at about 0800 hours. The weather was a little hazy so we kept low over the Meghalaya hills, the idea being that the enemy should not even get a whiff of our mission, i.e. that we were reconnoitring possible DZ areas for a massive air drop. The pull-up and photo run was good. The maps that we were given proved outdated and our navigation had to be on Dead Reckoning. Back to low level, we made the quickest get away possible; we encountered small arms fire, from the ground nearer the border, but it was ineffective. We could hear the sporadic chatter of our fighter/bomber pilots doing their job, on the secret radio telephony channel.

Back at base, there was no time to lose. The ground party was equally quick to respond, and develop and print photographs post haste. A quick plotting of coverage of the task area and it was immediately dispatched to Air HQ, for further execution. I hoped that the airdrop at Tangail by our para assault forces, and the advance to Dhaka by our ground troops benefited from those photographs and that in some way, they helped bring about the surrender at Dhaka.

CANBERRA MISSIONS ON BOTH FRONTS

WING COMMANDER A. RAGHUNATH, VRC

Mobilisation for Operations

I was one of four trainees undergoing the Advanced Navigation course at the Navigation & Signals School (NSS), Begumpet in 1971. I had been posted from the Air Force Academy to NSS, in June of that year. By then, the Mukti Bahini and the Pakistan Army were fighting pitched battles in East Pakistan. This was also when refugees were pouring into India in large numbers, adding further pressure on economic, health and security issues. Towards the end of September, our Officer Commanding, Wing Commander Nagarkatti, informed me that I must standby to be deployed and to be ready to participate in any operation, if called for. No definite instructions were issued regarding when or where I would be asked to move. The wait extended for over three weeks and I spent Diwali in the temporary Operations Room set up at NSS, awaiting orders. Finally on 18 October 1971, we were ordered to report at Begumpet airfield and board a C-119G-Fairchild Packet aircraft, scheduled to fly to Allahabad.

On reaching the aircraft, I met an old friend, Flight Lieutenant R.K. Bansal (Bouncy), with whom I had the pleasure of flying many sorties, when we had earlier served with 5 Canberra Squadron. Seeing my former squadron mate was a very pleasant surprise and it gave us the opportunity to

reminisce about the thrills of undertaking many hi-lo-hi bombing sorties from Agra to Jamnagar and back, on dark nights.

Our flight to Allahabad was uneventful and on landing, we were asked to report to Operations Room, where utter confusion prevailed. A large number of officers from different parts of the country had congregated there and everyone was seeking further information about what they should do. After a lapse of considerable time, we were told that a Dakota would pick up Bansal and I, and take us to Gorakhpur the next day where we were to report to No. 16 Squadron – the Cobras. We were asked to go to the Officers' Mess and rest for the night. The Officers' Mess was also in an overcrowded and chaotic state due to the sudden influx of officers from all over the country, with hardly any transit accommodation available for visiting officers like us. After dinner, we spread the bedding that we had brought with us on the floor, in a vacant room and tried to catch some sleep after a long day.

Assimilation into the Cobras

On landing at Gorakhpur, both of us reported to the Flight Commander, Squadron Leader D.R. Karnik. The suspense of not knowing what our role would be and where we would be deployed was over, once we were briefed at Karnik's office. I was elated on seeing ex-instructors and squadron mates from earlier tenures. Squadron Leader K.K. Datta, the Nav leader, made me feel that I was back in my old group of friends. I felt good to meet Wing Commander P. Gautam, MVC, BAR, VM, who had been my commanding officer when I was a trainee in JBCU and under whom I would now serve once again. He had already won many laurels in the Air Force, both within the country as well as abroad, in Iraq.

On reaching the Officers Mess, I was once again happily surprised to meet Squadron Leader R.N. Gautam (Budh Gautam), who was also one of my instructors during my days as a trainee. Squadron Leader Gautam could hold his audience enthralled from morning briefing time to pack up time,

with stories as varied as betting on horses, to lessons to be drawn from Mughal history.

Preparations for the Special Mission

Bansal and I, who had had a break from squadron operations, were put through training sorties, after brief check sorties in a T-4 trainer, instructed by Squadron Leader Gautam. This refresher was followed by bombing sorties at a range in Jamnagar from 8 October 1971. At that time, the Jamnagar station was commanded by Air Commodore P. Wilson. These were preparatory sorties for special missions to be undertaken by the squadron.

In November, the bombing practice sorties were followed by 4.5 inch reconnaissance flare drops and simulations of very low attitude bombings with only the glare light for guidance. Air Commodore P.P. Singh, MVC, was coordinating the launching of these sorties for the implementation of Y-Plan. This involved dropping specially prepared 1,000-pound bombs, from extremely low heights. These bombs spread a jelly-like substance along the runways and the spiker embedded in the substance disabled aircraft operations on those airstrips. These practice sorties demanded that flares be dropped at night, from a height of 3,000 feet, followed by the same aircraft carrying out a bombing run in the light of the flare, to drop the Y-Plan bomb. The crew did not know this type of bomb, but we were told to practice for this special mission on a runway, far from habitation. Between the days of completing the simulated sorties for Y-Plan and actual missions during the Bangladesh operations was a period of idle tension, with crews on standby day and night, in the underground operations rooms. The continuous state of alertness, expectations of mission orders at short notice and break from routine training sorties began to tell on the nerves of the crew who were itching for action.

War is Declared—Battle Inoculation: Raid over Murid Airfield

The day after the Pakistani attack on the western sector, the Y-Plan crews were asked to proceed to Ambala in our designated aircraft. For the initial sortie I was teamed with Squadron Leader Gautam and we took off on 3 December 1971, at about 1600 hrs., in a Canberra IF-924, and landed at Ambala an hour later. Soon after our landing and even before we had reached the operations room, air raid sirens started blaring and we were forced to run to the nearest bunkers to take shelter. After some time, an all-clear signal was given and we were picked up by a van and conveyed to the operations room. By then, it was still dark and we were given mission orders and the targets each crew was to bomb.

Squadron Leader Gautam and I were asked to attack Murid airfield, while Wing Commander P. Gautam and Squadron Leader Datta were ordered to attack Sargodha airfield. Since the time available to prepare the Y-Plan bombs and load them onto the aircraft was limited, except Wing Commander Gautam's aircraft, all the aircraft were loaded with eight conventional 1,000-pound bombs to be released over their respective targets. The aim was to take off and complete the mission before daybreak, the next day. On completing our map preparations and flight planning, the local signals officer, without clear explanation of the call signs, issued us with the authentication sheets. Similarly, there was no briefing about the target or the enemy counter measures. It was presumed that the crew would know about all these aspects. I sensed a feeling of haste, and a palpable tension in the room.

Making the crew depart without weather briefing or intelligence briefing was a gross departure from the meticulous planning that had gone into collecting the operational crews, and in the training for the special mission. Nobody had catered for interruption of our preparations by air raid warnings, which demanded black out conditions to be observed.

We took off for our mission towards Murid, well past midnight, on 4 December. The take-off for the mission and run up to the target in night conditions was uneventful, though both Gautam and I were on edge. The tension was palpable as we crossed the border and entered enemy territory for the first time, without being sure of what we would face. As we neared

15 nautical miles (nm) from Murid airfield, I asked Gautam to pull up to 7,000 feet, which was the height of the anti-aircraft fire expected and when we were 5 nm away, on the Doppler green satin distance indicator, I gave the signal to open the bomb doors and steady the aircraft. At this time, I could hear my own as well as the pilot's heavy breathing in my headphones. When the cross hairs of the bombsight was at the beginning of the runway and quickly moving under the navigator clear vision panel, I released all the eight bombs, whose bright explosions was visible as they hit their target.

After dropping the bombs, Gautam put the aircraft in a steep dive and turned away from the target, at the same time accelerating to 450 knots from the earlier 360 knots. The turn was executed in a wide arc and we moved in a northeasterly direction, as opposed to an easterly course, which I was asking Gautam to do. This caused the aircraft to veer away from the track to get home. Soon, I sensed steep hills looming ahead of us; we were dangerously close to the hills. On being cautioned of what could happen if we continued on the same course, Gautam turned southeastward, maintaining the same speed. This took us over the Shimla hills, well north of Chandigarh and to a direction that was not expected of us, while returning to base. Our request for homing to both Ambala or Chandigarh proved futile, since we could not give them the correct authentication. Authentication sheets given to us were of the wrong date. On crossing over Chandigarh, we decided to pull up and come to circuit height and put on our navigation lights to reveal ourselves. At this juncture, Ambala ATC called our mission number over the radio and asked us to confirm our position. We promptly declared that we were in the vicinity of the airfield and requested them to enable us to land. Soon, the runway lights came on and further landing was uneventful, though our heavy breathing was still audible. Later, debriefing at the operation room was perfunctory. While we were going through the debriefing formalities, Wing Commander Gautam and Squadron Leader Datta walked in after their mission and declared that they had faced heavy anti-aircraft fire at Sargodha, while on their low-level bombing run, and providence had saved them from one harm. They were the only crew who carried the specially prepared bombs for this mission,

which was to be executed within the first few days of the commencement of hostilities. Their task, one that had a great element of surprise, was accomplished, but under very high risk conditions.

On completion of the debrief and after a very welcome cup of hot coffee at the Ambala ops room, we set course for Gorakhpur and landed as day was breaking over the home base. The battle inoculation was complete, with this first bombing mission over enemy territory, which left me with a feeling of elation and euphoria.

An Abandoned Mission (5 December)

On the evening of 4 December, Squadron Leader Gautam and I, Flight Lieutenants Brian Wilson, R.B. Mehta, Nirmal Thusu, Ranganathan, Kapil Kak, and Squadron Leader Thate were ordered to board a C-119G Packet aircraft and proceed to Ambala. The instructions were that the Canberra aircraft that we were to fly, would be flown in from Agra and positioned at Ambala, and subsequently, would be loaded with the specially prepared Y-Plan bombs. Just as we landed at Ambala, there was an air raid warning, so we had to jump into air raid trenches, next to the dispersal, and we remained there until the 'All Clear' was given, an hour later. On reporting to Base Operations at Ambala, we were given mission orders to proceed to Chander, as soon as the aircraft were loaded. However, the loading of the Y-Plan bombs onto the aircraft was interrupted by incessant air raid warnings, which drastically delayed readying the aircraft within the dark hours available to complete the missions. Due to these delays and inability to complete the mission and return safely before daybreak, the entire plan had to be abandoned. The aircraft, which had been packed with the Y-Plan bombs, were unloaded and sent back to their home base at Agra, and all of us were asked to await the arrival of a transport aircraft which would convey us back to our base. This aircraft did not show up throughout the day. Meanwhile, a casual walk around the ops room and to the nearby anti-aircraft battery made me understand the extent of enemy interference to our planned operations the previous night. The AA battery had exhausted its

entire ammunition, which was meant for two nights, in just one night to prevent enemy aircraft from carrying out a successful raid. However, they were also effective in preventing us from launching our missions. In order for us to retain the element of surprise, it was vital that we completed our mission within the first two days of the operation. One more night was spent in the ops room, where they had made makeshift arrangements for the crew awaiting mission orders. My coursemate, Gerald Theophilus, who was also awaiting mission orders in the hall, where makeshift beds were laid out for crew to rest, conveyed the news of loss of Flight Lieutenant Nathani and Flying Officer Purohit in the previous night's operation. All the stranded crew of the No. 16 Squadron were retrieved on the morning of 6 December in Canberras, each aircraft carrying two extra airmen besides the regular two-man crew of one pilot and one navigator. Due to the high risk involved, the Y-Plan missions were abandoned and operations with conventional bombs were undertaken, thereafter. All the effort in preparing for over six weeks for this special task was for nought.

Raid over Khulna Ammunition Dump (7 December)

On the morning of 7 December, I was teamed up with Flight Lieutenant Pradhan, for a bombing raid in aircraft IF-969, over the ammunition dump at Khulna, in East Pakistan. Along with us, three more aircraft were detailed for this mission that was to take place in broad daylight. We were directed to route through Dum Dum Airport in Calcutta to refuel and carry out the bombing run over the ammunition dump, from 7,000 feet and then return straight to Gorakhpur. These missions were considered milk runs, since no enemy action was expected and the crew were comparatively stress free. Later, such an attitude proved to be disastrous. Strict radio silence was to be maintained. The flight to Dum Dum was uneventful. We were asked to wait at dispersal, where a squadron of Gnats was also parked. The temporary accommodation in the form of tents was the flight crew room. The pilots of the Gnat squadron were anxious to see some more action, and one could sense their eagerness to score more kills against enemy aircraft. The flight

from Dum Dum to Khulna, with eight 1,000-pounds bombs, was like a routine sortie and the target was a large group of ammunition sheds spread over a very wide area. All aircraft released their bombs over the target, which was already shrouded in dust and smoke from bombardment by the lead aircraft. This was the only bombing raid that I undertook over East Pakistan, and all four aircraft returned to Gorakhpur safely. The evening news as usual announced that IAF had carried out extensive bombing over Khulna, resulting in deaths of many innocent civilians. Maybe some of the bombs had hit the adjacent jute factory, which was in close proximity to the ammunition dump. However, I must say that my pilot Pradhan maintained absolute professional confidence throughout the mission and did not deviate from the instructions I was giving during transit to the target or while on the bombing run over the target. It left me with a feeling of a mission successfully completed.

Raid over Sulaimanke Headworks Dam (10 December)

On the night of 9 December, I was detailed to carry out a bombing sortie with Flight Lieutenant Nirmal Thusu as my pilot. The target was Sulaimanke Headworks Dam, which was close to the border, across the Sutlej river. Thusu and I took off from Gorakhpur, in a Canberra, with eight 1,000-pound bombs, and landed at Agra to refuel and await mission orders giving us the exact location and the time over the target. On this raid, we were to be recovered at Ambala. We took off from Agra after the necessary preparations and briefing, and proceeded towards the target. We had been given no intelligence regarding the presence of any enemy resistance in the form of anti-aircraft guns, or fighters. On nearing the target, during the pull up to bombing height, enemy AAs became active and we could see the slow ascent of the green and blue shells, rising to meet us. This gave us a clearer location of the exact target, which was on the banks of the vast and shiny river. The bombs were released thanks to Thusu's adherence to my calls to maintain height and direction during the bombing run. Immediately after the bombs had been dropped, the aircraft descended in a merciless dive to

hug the ground and head home towards Ambala. On every one of these much-needed steep dive manoeuvres, I was pinned to the cushion, behind the bombsight, located in the nose of the plane. I could regain my normal position only after levelling off close to the ground. On reaching close to Ambala, the Signal Unit which was covering us sounded relieved to hear our voice. Landing at Ambala in limited runway lights was normal. Soon after our landing S.L. Tak Khanna, who was directing the aircraft for recovery at the Signal Unit, came to meet us. He told us that we ought to thank our stars, as Pakistani fighters had been on our tail from the moment we had released our bombs and were heading back home. The enemy fighters could not pursue us deep enough in to our territory to make a kill, because of their limited radius of action and our low altitude and speed. Besides the presence of our fighters in the air, in the general area was a deterrent. I must praise Thusu's handling of the aircraft in the dive after the bombing run, as well as the very low height on the way home, which saved us that day.

After the debrief in the operations room, with a hot cup of coffee and biscuits at 0300 hours, we headed back to Gorakhpur, to clear Ambala before day break, so that we were not sitting ducks on the tarmac, in the event of an enemy raid during the day. However, before departing from the ops room, I had the pleasant surprise of meeting my ex-Flight Commander, Shorty Thakar, who was also on a similar mission, which had launched from Agra. They too had a successful mission over the Headworks and both the crews were satisfied at having completed a mission successfully and remaining alive, despite being shot at by enemy AAs, and chased by fighters in the night. The return to Gorakhpur for a well-earned sleep, was routine.

Radar Painting and Raid over Montgomery Railway Yard (13 December)

My most memorable mission was undertaken on the night of 11 December, in a Canberra, with Flight Lieutenant Y.S. Rao (Yankee Rao). We were

ordered to proceed to Ambala, with a load of eight 1,000-pound bombs and await mission orders. The flight to Ambala from Gorakhpur in the night was uneventful, but for the uncertainty about what we would be asked to do on reaching. At Ambala, we were told that we had to undertake a radar painting operation in the southeast sector, covered by the radar unit, at Sakesar in Pakistan. Then, we were to drop four bombs on Montgomery railway yard and the remaining four on the railway track running between Montgomery and Lahore, which was the troop movement railway line for the Pakistan Army. Our low level mission up to the designated coordinates south-east of Sakesar, was like a hide and seek game with the Sakesar unit—popping up to reveal ourselves then to hug the ground again, and proceed in a different direction to move away from enemy fighters, if sighted. This hoodwinking the enemy for some time, was followed by a low-level pass at 3,000 feet, over Montgomery railway yard. Much to our surprise, the yard lights were on, but on hearing us, they were extinguished, making it easy for us to sight the target and release the bombs. The subsequent low-level run following the railway line from Montgomery to Lahore was almost like a gift given to us. This was because it was very easy to sight the tracks and a major road running adjacent to it, that was parallel to the Bari Doab canal, which was glistening in the night. The bombing run along the railway line, at 3,000 feet made the aircraft feel the blast as well. This was a perfect textbook run, because of Yankee Rao's ability to fly low at night, while adhering to my speed and direction orders. This was despite the tension of enemy action and unmarked high tension cables. Yankee remained exceptionally calm through the hide and seek game that we were playing on this radar mission. Yankee's professionalism was exceptional and his faith in me as his navigator was unmatched.

On completion of our bombing run, we headed home towards Palam and landed in the early morning light. After a very successful and satisfactory mission, the return flight from Palam to Gorakhpur was in broad daylight. Subsequently, we learnt that this high-risk mission of radar painting was ordered to detract the enemy fighters, away from the Chicken's Neck area, near Jammu. The only way to relieve the situation for our ground forces

was to pin the enemy, by bombing across the enemy lines, without interference from their fighters.

I believe that I was very lucky to have been assigned this mission and more so as that was teamed with a pilot as capable as Yankee Rao. To this day, I recall with pride, his skill and expertise, and his faith in the crew members.

These missions remain the highlight of my career in the Air Force.

DECEMBER DIARY

FLYING WITH THE BATTLE AXES

WING COMMANDER KULBIR SINGH HARNAL

Wing Commander Kulbir Singh Harnal was a young pilot with the Battle Axes No. 7 Squadron, based at Bagdogra, when the war broke out. No. 7 Squadron was one of the few squadrons that took part in the action on both fronts.

This is a day-by-day account of the squadron's operations, on the Eastern and Western Fronts.



Day One: 4 December 1971, Bagdogra

The Commanding Officer came to our rooms, the previous evening with the news that the ‘Balloon had gone up’ in the western sector and so we would be on call, the next morning.

‘Briefing at 5 a.m.,’ he said.

He also told us that he would be at the bar later in the evening, to ensure that nobody had more than three drinks, and that the bar closed on time.



Flt Lt Andre Rudolf D'Costa, 8175 F (P) was the first pilot that the Battle Axes lost.

After the Met briefing (weather report), we received the FLOT (Forward Line of own Troops) briefing, from the Ground Liaison Officer (GLO) – an Army Major – to ensure that we engaged targets beyond that line.

After that, we checked that all Indian tags on our clothes were removed. We were given a revolver each with 12 rounds, and a Bangladeshi flag, which was supposed to be shown to the Mukti Bahini, if we were shot down. We were also given a money belt with 200 Pakistani rupees.

I flew two missions on the first day, which were a life changing experience for me. I found that my anxiety vanished when my engine roared to life. The best part of the mission was firing a long burst at the Lal Munir Hat control tower. The Boss shouted, ‘Good burst laddie!’, as the glass shattered.

We lost two Hunters that day and one pilot, Flight Lieutenant Andre D'Costa was shot down, and Guptaji had his hydraulics shot up and an

outboard drop tank hang up, so he had to eject overhead at 10G. It was like a demo ejection.

In the evening, we brought Sandra (Mrs D'Costa) and the kids to the mess and tried to give them hope. His body was never found in the marshy area, where he went down.

Someone switched on the Pak radio news, on a transistor and the announcer said that Pak troops had reached Siliguri. I remember telling the barman Dey, '*Dekho bahar koi paki officer ghoom raha hai to andar drink ke liye bulao.*'

It sunk in that tomorrow would be another day of fighting, and any day could be our last.

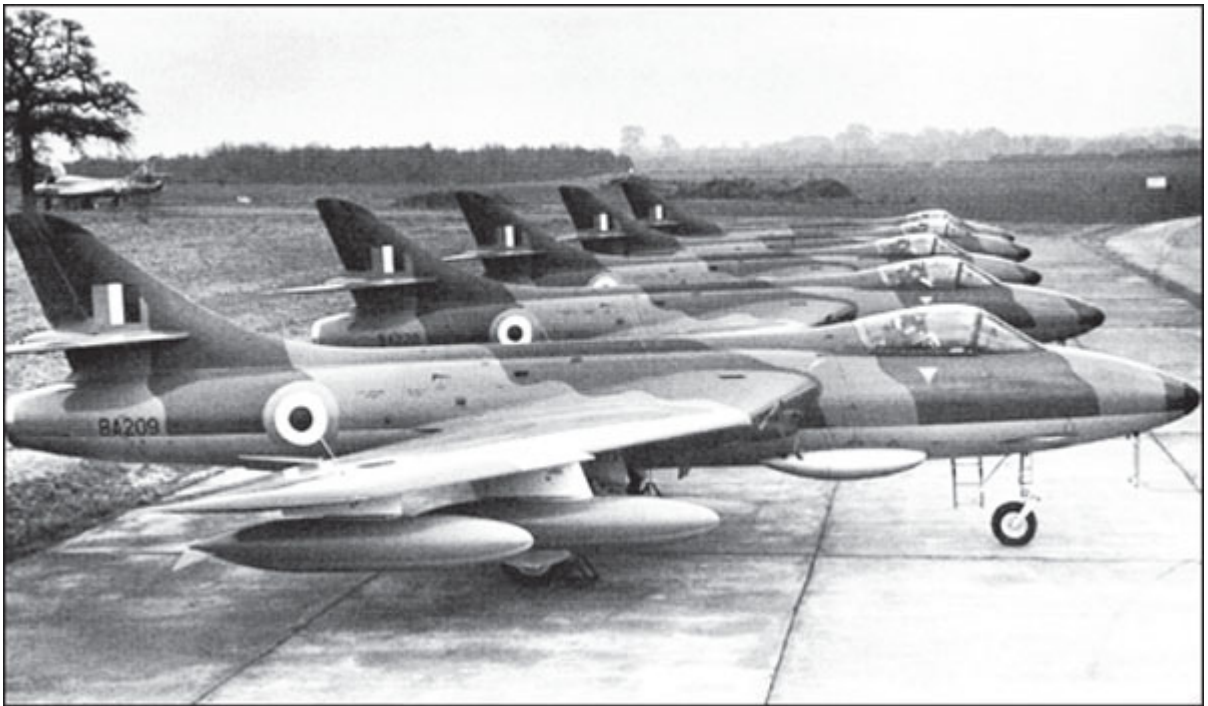
Day Two: 5 December 1971, Bagdogra

The second day began early. I was to continue in the same formation, led by the Boss, Bunny Coelho. Our deputy leader, Guptaji, who had been shot down was replaced, as he was still recovering from the injuries he had sustained the previous day.

Our targets were ferries and bridges. No air opposition was expected, as Dhaka and other enemy air bases had been subjected to severe air strikes, and neutralized on the first day itself. We later learned that there was no credible Pakistani air power left to counter IAF strikes. It was said that the few remaining Pakistani pilots had fled to West Pakistan via Burma. I believe that the absence of a threat from the Pakistani Air Force helped the army in its advance to Dhaka.

The firepower of the Hunter's four 30 mm Aden guns using high explosive ammunition, was deadly. When I fired a 3-4 second burst on a train, for a second it seemed like nothing had happened and then suddenly, the bogie just blew off the rails. Why did the train not wait for the cover of night before it began its journey? It became obvious that this was a troop train, moving troops to some critical area, which warranted movement by day. By the time we swung around for the second pass, we drew heavy small-arms fire and my aircraft was hit by bullets under the wing, but not in

any critical area. Another unforgettable and sad sight was the masses of people scrambling for cover, if we flew over one of the refugee camps set up near the border. It was a heart-rending sight to watch them try to outrun a fighter jet. These hapless people now associated the sound and sight of a screaming jet with imminent death. We would waggle wings to show our friendly status.



A classic shot of the Hunter Mk 56, the same type of aircraft operated by No. 7 Squadron during the war.

Another rather funny, but somehow encouraging sight was of the DSC guards patrolling the taxi tracks and near the ORR, making crude signs when we taxied past them. They were trying to wish the pilot good luck. This was followed by a sharp rifle salute.

The Hunter has two globular pods on either side of the four front guns, where the links deposit after rounds are fired. These are called 'Sabrinas'. After a mission, when the airmen would open the Sabrina, the links would fall to the ground with a clanging sound. This would result in an impromptu bhangra accompanied by much cheering and shouting.

I always left my jacket with the airman, who helped me strap up and told him I would be back to claim it. This became a sort of ritual handing/taking each time I returned, accompanied with clapping and cheering.

That evening, thinking of the front gun burst on the train, I realized that I may have killed some people. But then I recalled the many flashes from the ground, near the target and I said to myself, they were trying to get me too, it was either them or me. Those flashes were real anti-aircraft fire aimed at my jet. I thanked my stars, that I was still alive today. Tomorrow would be another round in this deadly game, played by both sides, for the honour and freedom of our countries. At least that is what most of us felt back then.

At the end of day two, we were told to pack our bags, as the squadron would be moving to the Western sector the next day. Thankfully, we did not lose any pilot or airplane on the second day.

Day Three: 6 December 1971, Bagdogra-Kanpur-Hindon

This was a day of no action.

The commanding officer was only told to move the squadron to Kanpur. Further orders would be given on reaching there. Transport support arrived early and we loaded up. Surprisingly, we saw our squadron 'Doc', Jackie Gupta, arrive fully geared up. He announced that he would move with the squadron. This was the Battle Axes josh!

So we ferried all the available aircraft, loaded with armed front guns to Kanpur. From there, we were ordered to fly to Hindon, where we reached late in the afternoon. An unexciting day.

Someone's brother came in from Delhi, in an Ambassador car and a few of us drove off to have a meal at Delhi's Moti Mahal, in Daryaganj, under black out conditions. We were clad in our flying suits, as our personal baggage had not yet arrived. The owners refused to bill us and with folded hands wished us luck with the Punjabi blessing '*Jinde Raho*' , (may you live long).

We stayed in town with friends, to return early the next day to learn that the squadron was to move to Nal, a forward base, near Bikaner, in Rajasthan.

Day Four: 7 December 1971, Hindon-Nal

It was my mother's birthday. My first thought that morning was that it wasn't a good day to get killed. However, there were no strike missions that day as well. We received orders to proceed to Nal, but take-off was delayed, due to the fog at Hindon.

The ferry was completed by early afternoon. Nal turned out to be a pretty desolate place in the Thar desert. The base was active, as a Mystere squadron was already operating from there. The airfield had been bombed a few times in the past few days. The aircraft were parked in blast pens, but there was no ORR or crew room, only a small underground base ops complex was available.

The day ended with the transport aircraft, a Fairchild Packet, being given CAP (Combat Air Patrol) cover for arrival and unloading. I had never seen a Packet being unloaded so fast! After take-off, it was escorted 100 miles out of Nal, by a dusk patrol—a two ship formation with guns, loaded up.

Some of us were dispersed to the Signal Unit (SU) officers mess in town, while others stayed on base. The fighter controllers were a nice lot. Meeting them personally created a good sense of camaraderie, as these were the people who would give us radar cover for missions flown in the next few days.

The group going to town was given a requisitioned civil Jonga taxi, as aircrew transport, driven by a local civilian driver named Jetharam. I wondered at his security clearance status, as he was around the entire day and he could see whatever was going on.

Day Five: 8 December 1971, Nal

I came in early with Jetharam for briefing at the base ops. There were no targets allocated, so we could not decide what armament should be loaded up, or the drop tank configuration. It made Chief Bhasin's work tentative. The typical order was, 'Keep both bombs and rockets on the cradles.'

The Boss reassured Bhasin that he would get the time needed to configure the planes. Then Indian ingenuity chipped in, 'Configure four aircraft with bombs and four others with rockets.' Problem solved (when two 1,000-pound bombs are carried under wing, then only two fuel drop tanks can be attached, reducing strike range. However, rocket pods allow four drop tanks to be attached.)

Later in the morning, two search and destroy missions were ordered. The mission was, look for enemy tanks on the other side of the border. The Boss decided to go with T-10 rockets with guns, which were always loaded with HE/AP (high explosive/armour piercing) rounds. The mission did not see anything worthwhile to report. Secondary targets were engaged. The story was the same for all missions flown that day including the one I flew.

Nobody reported any anti-aircraft fire, nor did anybody take any hits. On the air defence side, the ORP aircraft were static the entire day. A CAP was mounted at dusk, to shake off the monotony and get into the air.

Logistics were poor. Food was a problem and operating from open blast pens in the desert meant being exposed to both the cold and the heat, and back at the mess, sleeping on the carpet became irritating. Most of us were beginning to wonder what the purpose of coming to this disorganized place was. People wanted some action, and we hadn't seen any after the first two days. Even the PAF bombers did not come that night.

Day Six: 9 December 1971, Nal

This day started with a briefing by the officer-in-charge of base ops, who was the Mission Liaison Officer with Command Headquarters, and ended with us losing our commanding officer, who was shot down. Once again, the missions being ordered were more of the search-and-destroy type. Radar Cover was limited. Flying deck level made navigation difficult in the desert,

especially when weaving all the time. The ammunition was T-10 rockets and guns.

No military movement was spotted. Later, we changed our tactics and decided to operate at around 5,000 feet, to take a moments rest during the mission. This exposed us to the enemy radar, and increased the chances of drawing enemy fighters to engage us. It also improved our field of vision and contact with our own radar. This sort of offensive sweep also increased the scope of mission. We were raring to engage enemy fighters, if they came for us. All of us had practiced plenty of low level dog fighting in the run up to this war.

However, we felt neither joy nor grief, as our two aircraft formation could have been bounced by a formation of four or more enemy fighters. To avoid any nasty surprises, we remained in our territory near the border and under radar cover of our signal unit.

Perhaps we were looking for a thrust by the enemy armour, which actually happened at Longewala. Pilots started taking on sundry targets and sometimes the ordnance was inappropriate for the target engaged. Nobody wanted to return without discharging his weapon load.

The Boss was shot down near a huge bridge, which he and his wing man were engaging with T-10 rockets. His wingman saw him eject from a burning aircraft. Apparently, he ejected almost on the border during a 180 degree turn. Enemy troops got to him first and he was taken prisoner. Had the direction of his dive been easterly instead of westerly, he would have ejected well into our territory, after taking a hit. We learned the hard way that for future attacks on targets we should stay closer to the border.

Boss came back after 18 months. He told us that after his capture, there was a heated argument amongst his captors, with him standing right there regarding what they ought to do with their prisoner. Some soldiers wanted to kill him right there, to avenge the death of some colleagues by his attack, while others wanted to hand him over to their superiors and claim a reward for shooting down his aircraft. Luckily for him, tthe latter prevailed.

He recounted a funny story of PAF pilot's wives coming in a group, to look at IAF pilots behind bars, in the POW camp. One of our guys asked

them loudly, 'What did you expect to see monkeys? You should have brought peanuts to throw at us.' They were embarrassed and left quickly.

I performed two useless missions that day. I fired rockets on a rather big factory-type structure and the second time on a power station, both times on the way back to base.

In my capacity as adjutant, I had another kind of problem to deal with. The airmen were accommodated in a school building and because we had no cooks, they were told to cook their own food. The men had to report before dawn and work until dusk. The situation appeared bad.

Officiating CO Allan Ally asked me to handle it, as he was too busy with ops matters. In turn, I told JWO Bhasin, one of the best I have seen, to detail some men of the non-ops trades to manage the cooking, whilst I tried to get local help.

Back to the mess. Three regulation shots and bhujia, both Bikaneri and *do aanda ka* another day behind me, and yet another looming ahead in this deadly scenario of living from day-to-day.

Day Seven: 10 December 1971, Nal

This day was not very different from the last two as far as operations were concerned, except for one incident, which is still vividly etched in my memory.

We got a new Commanding Officer, Wing Commander N.C. Suri, who was in the DASI Team before being assigned this job. He was a very experienced Hunter pilot, having commanded a similar type of squadron. I was designated to be his wingman.

In the morning, we were visited by the Governor of Rajasthan, Shri Barkatullah Khan, and his charming wife. They brought buckets of rasgollas as a gift. However, they were off the mark, when it came to what we were doing operationally. In an impeccable accent, Mrs Khan congratulated us for creating history. Apparently, she thought we were the Hunter Squadron, which had put to the sword the enemy armour thrust at Longewala. The film, *Border*, was based on the heroic action of these men.

I flew one mission that day. We were on a tactical reconnaissance mission in the area, near the town of Bhawalpur, in enemy territory. I spotted dust being kicked up, which indicated that there was some vehicle movement. I manoeuvred into position for an attack. In the dive, my gun safety catch was unlocked and my finger ready to squeeze the trigger. When almost within firing range, I clearly saw that the moving target was a black car. I did not fire but made a low pass, telling my wingman to hold fire and buzz the still moving car, which he did.

Usually on hearing the sound of jets, vehicles immediately stop and the drivers, expecting an attack, get away from them to avoid being killed. But not this one, it just kept going. I made another dive attack, but just could not get myself to fire. A one second FG burst would have blown this car to smithereens. I disengaged and asked my wingman to join up as we headed back.

To this day, I wonder who could have been at the wheel of that car, so oblivious of death screaming above their heads. Perhaps, some pretty damsel on her way to a rendezvous, lost in her own thoughts, unaware of the raging war.

The new boss was clearly unhappy with the task assigned to the squadron. He was instrumental in getting headquarters to reconsider our deployment, and the next day we learned that we were slated to move to Pathankot, where the real action was.

Some airmen were complaining that it was difficult to work without proper food. It became my unpleasant duty to make everyone fall in and remind them that we were at war and we had to take these problems in our stride and work until we dropped. Pilots were flying missions after popping rasgollas. Refusal to work in the war zone was a serious offense, punishable by a field court martial.

I have to confess that earlier, JWO Bhasin had used similar words and requested me to strengthen his position by repeating the same. ‘After all, I have to get work out of them,’ he said. Nothing like a seasoned warrant officer, on the side of a young adjutant.

By the evening, it was confirmed that we were going to move the next day.

Jetharam drove us back to the mess, via the market place. He treated us to hot tea and kachories, as a crowd gathered. It was his way of saying, 'Thank You'.

When back to base after the war, the story about that talk between Bhasin and I leaked out. At a Rum Punch, some airmen showed their anger, but things settled down, when I said we had no choice but to keep things going, and apologized for that empty threat.

Their anger quickly dissipated, after I did a couple of arm locked chug-a-lug (Bottoms Up) with the angry airmen.

Day Eight: 11 December 1971, Nal-Hindon-Pathankot

The aircraft were readied for the ferry to Pathankot via Hindon. Front guns were armed with a four drop tank configuration. However, take-off was delayed due to fog at Hindon.

One aircraft had to be ferried to the repair depot at Kanpur, after patch repair to bullet holes. It however needed major fixing. Surprisingly, one of the senior operational pilots wanted to go. He was our late commanding officer's Number 2, the one who had seen him eject from the burning aircraft. Normally, this job would be given to a junior pilot, and there were many available, but the CO let him go. He didn't re-joined the squadron until the day after the war was over. The war exposure affected him so much that he committed suicide a few months later. Nobody knew about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in those days, so he didn't get any medical help. In fact, all of us could have used some post-war counselling, but we settled down, each in his own style, some taking more time than others.

Finally, we reached our destination late in the afternoon.

We learned that the two Hunter Squadrons that had been operating from there since the beginning of the war, had taken heavy losses and had been sent to Hindon the same day for R&R (rest and recuperation). Five pilots

had been killed in one of the squadrons and the other one had lost two. They had been in a tough fight. In comparison, we had one killed, one taken POW, and one safe ejection.

We settled down quickly, in the crew room of one of the squadron's that had ferried out. Things were pretty well organized. The base was being bombed multiple times a day, so procedures during an attack had to be followed to the hilt.

There was a Pilot Dispersal Plan in place. Not more than six pilots were to stay in one building, so that casualties would be reduced in case the building took a direct hit. This was also to ensure that there were pilots available to fly the next day.

I was amongst the lucky six, who were to stay in a hotel in town. It was called the Airlines Hotel. We got there late in the evening and were allotted three rooms, for the six of us. We ordered a good meal, which was a luxury after Nal. As adjutant, I signed the bill and the six of us knocked off on comfortable beds, in heated rooms. It was unsaid, but everyone felt that the next day would perhaps be more challenging than any we had seen thus far.

Day Nine: 12 December 1971, Pathankot

We left our hotel early, when it was still dark and reported to the squadron. The bosses were huddled in the underground base ops complex, which was the nerve centre of all operations.

When a mission was ordered, the pilots selected for it would be driven to base ops, for briefing. After that, they remained there, in a separate room, and did not get to speak with anyone, who was not a part of the mission. There was a senior escort with them at all times, after the mission briefing.

When the time came to go, we were taken straight to the aircraft from the base ops. This ensured that we did not discuss our mission details with anyone. This need-to-know policy was to prevent information being passed to enemy intelligence, suspected of infiltrating our security.

During previous missions, it was reported that the enemy knew the mission call sign, frequency, and had given radio calls to split the formation

over the target, causing loss of mutual cross cover. Enemy fighters were able to shoot down one formation leader, after his wingman was told to turn the wrong way. Further, there was radio jamming too.

Boss decided that any manoeuvre ordered by a mission leader, would be done by using our short name and not the mission call sign. My only mission that day was a bomb attack on an enemy railway yard in a town close to the border. The aim was to cause enough damage to the yard to disrupt movement of supplies to their forward line of troops, during the night.

We struck late in the afternoon, to give them less time for repair. We encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire, as if they were expecting us, but no enemy fighters were spotted. Our formation was escorted by two Gnats to cover our tail and take on enemy fighters, in case we were bounced. If something like that happened our jettison live guard was open – jettison bombs and engage was the briefing. Keep heading towards home, after neutralizing enemy positional advantage. It is not heroic to engage in an extended dog fight in enemy territory and be unable to make it back, because you are running short on fuel, or worse having to eject in enemy territory.

Ordnance was two 1,000-pound bombs and front guns. A two-pass attack was made with the Gnats circling above. When we finished, we went buster power and hugged the ground. The escort formation had a tough time keeping up. There was a combat air patrol (CAP) over base for our recovery.

My aircraft had no bullet hits, but my wingman's fin had some proximity damage by shrapnel from an AA shell burst. The gun camera film showed a direct hit by the bombs and a punishing long FG burst in the second pass. The debrief over, it was back to the crew room.

We returned to the hotel after dark, to avoid being seen wearing G-suits by the public. We ordered some good, hot food, had a couple of shots, ate, and went off to bed; each of us thanking our stars that we were back.

Day Ten: 13 December 1971, Pathankot

This day was more or less like the previous one, except that I did not lead a mission, but flew wingman to Boss. The target was a radar tower, which was engaged in the morning. The briefing pictures showed that it looked like a water reservoir. It was said to be heavily defended, as it was vital to the enemy in detecting incoming army support missions, in the Chicken Neck area, where a raging ground battle was in progress.

Two SU-7s had taken bad hits, with one ejection, trying to neutralize this target the previous day. Ours was going to be a two-ship formation, armed with rockets and guns. We would be escorted by two MiG-21s. A Hunter had the same fire power as a SU-7, but would present a smaller target to the anti-aircraft batteries.

After section take-off, we were on our way with the MiGs covering us. Visibility was pretty limited. Boss was an ace navigator and made a flawless run from IP (Initial Point), where I moved to a tactical starboard position. We pulled up exactly at the pull-up point (PUP). Boss rolled in, and I followed. The target appeared in front of us. The MIG leader called, 'Tail Clear.'

We fired our rockets in sequence, and then I focussed on trying not to lose Boss in that poor visibility. We turned around and pulled up for the FG run. After a perfect manoeuvre, the tower appeared in the front wind shield and I was able to track it with minimum correction. I had lagged a bit to be able to squeeze the trigger in a longer burst after Boss pulled out, however, I was able to press home a longish burst with my pipper riding the target.

'Catch Up', was the only call by Boss, I replied, 'Contact', as we started our home run. The MiG leader gave a cool call, 'With you, Tiger Leader, Tail Clear.' We recovered at base without any casualty.

There were no hits on any of the aircraft. Perhaps, the poor visibility helped. I must say that Boss's excellent positioning allowed me to make a pretty good attack. After sighting the gun camera film, Boss looked at me and just nodded his head, and said, 'Go and relax.'

Later, we found out that according to intelligence reports, the tower was rendered non-operational for a couple of days at least.

Back at the squadron, I asked the armourer, 'How many rounds did I fire from my kite?' (Airmen often refer to their aircraft as 'kites'). He told me that I had fired 386 rounds, and that Boss had already called from base ops, and asked. I should have thought so. Knowing that, and seeing my tracking on the film, would allow damage assessment. With four guns firing at 80 rounds per second per gun, that made it a little more than a one second burst.

That afternoon a major from the Army Headquarters called me to ask how I was. He said my father, who was in Bombay, wanted to know. This was the state of communication!

Back at the hotel, the locals had come to know that some pilots were staying there. People gathered outside with parathas, milk, *lassi* and sweets. They showed us so much affection, it was a moving experience. We mingled freely with them, receiving their good wishes and blessings. There was not even a guard outside. I suppose those days wars were fought on the battlefield by men and not like they are today, by raining death on innocent women and children.

Day Eleven: 14 December 1971, Pathankot

We were getting news from the East that the army was making good progress, and that Dhaka was being bombed by IAF Dakotas and Caribous. 'This war may end soon,' was the rumour that was going around. Hearing such things, one could not help thinking, 'Hope I'm OK when that happens.'

Anyway, another day was upon us and a job had to be done.

The Hunter has an armament safety plug, which makes all electrical armament circuits live when connected. It is plugged in just before taxiing out, to ensure safety, so that no armament is discharged inadvertently on the ground. The final action which makes the weapons live is the retraction of the under-carriage after take-off.

I was to fly again today, as wingman to the Boss in a strike on another rail head. The TOT (Time over Target) was around noon. The start-up, taxi-

out and a line-up for a right echelon section take-off was uneventful. We were rolling for take-off, with the nose wheel off the ground, when I felt a lurch to the left, and the aircraft started pulling that way. I applied rudder to correct and yanked her off the ground, seconds ahead of Boss, who perhaps did not notice what was going on to his right.

My mind was racing, as Boss put his wheels up and started to pull away. On instinct, I put my under carriage up, so as not to lag behind and got back into position. We continued on our mission with no radio call from me, reporting the suspected tyre blow out. No call from ATC too. Perhaps, they could not see that well from the bunker they were operating from.

The tester burst went off OK. I maintained the open battle position in the run-in from IP. In the pull-up, I fanned out, as this was an area target and could be tracked simultaneously.

The attack was executed with precision, with direct hits and long FG runs, fired in parallel dives, taking on different targets. My bombs hit one end of the huge yard and the guns ripped open a few of what looked like storage sheds. Boss gathered up the formation by throwing a turn into me, as I slipped into an open battle position. MiGs were on the ball, as Boss called, 'Buster', and we hugged the deck on the way back home.

After peel off at base, our escort MiGs set up a CAP for our landing, as there was an air raid warning in place. On downwind I transmitted, 'Suspect left tyre burst, will be landing on right edge, request assistance.' Due to the air raid warning, there was no time for any fly past inspection by ATC, who were anyway located in a bunker.

I landed and managed to control the aircraft, I kept it on the concrete, and cleared the runway.

ATC said, 'Jump out, and get away from the aircraft.'

I stood up on the seat, with the ejection seat pin still out, and managed to slide down over the nose and drop to the ground in front of the aircraft.

No fire tenders arrived, due to the air raid alert. Luckily, I was OK and there was no fire on the shredded out tyre with an exposed rim, or on the opposite side, where heavy differential braking had occurred.

It was not advisable to be on the runway during an air raid, so I started running away from my aircraft. The memories of four Mirages tearing up their target, with long bursts, were fresh enough to make me run as fast as I could. There is nothing more vulnerable than a sitting duck in the open, during an air raid.

The raid did not happen, so an ALR jeep picked me up after the all clear was sounded. We went through the usual de-brief. My attack film showed a job well done. None of our aircrafts were hit.

Later, I was sipping a cuppa, when the Boss called me aside. ‘Tell me boy, do you have some sort of meter or tyre pressure gauge in the cockpit? How could you know in the air that your left tyre has burst?’

I just kept looking at him.

‘Tell me when did it burst?’

‘On take-off,’ I replied sheepishly.

He went ballistic, calling me a mission-crazy mad man, who retracted a burning wheel into the tyre bay of a fully armed aircraft. ‘You could have blown up your aircraft’, he repeated a few times before telling me to get the hell out of his sight.

Later in the crew room, we discussed this amongst us and I realized how close I may have come to killing myself. I should have kept the wheels down and aborted the mission. But then Boss would have had to abort too, as he could not fly without a wingman. A senior pilot had gone alone, a few days ago. He was pounced upon by enemy fighters and shot down quite easily, after being sandwiched.

Looking back, I feel this was no dumb display of bravado, but a reflex action in a hyper-charged environment, where most of us wanted to get the job done.

All I remember is that I wanted to get back into position, because for a wingman, lagging is a cardinal sin.

Boss put up my name for a Vir Chakra that day, but did not tell or congratulate me. That was another day behind us.

Day Twelve: 15 December 1971, Pathankot

A fighter pilot's biggest nightmare is not getting killed, but having to eject in enemy territory, and that too near the target which has just been attacked. Capture by angry civilians is about the worst thing that can happen to someone who has been shot down.

All of us were required to memorize a personal background cover-up story, in case we were captured. A rather useless ploy to sell to angry people, who have just been bombed by you and your colleagues. They are going to let you have it, story, or no story.

Anyway, I had decided I would pretend to be a Parsi Bawa as I could speak Gujarati, and hoped like hell the masquerade would spare me a thrashing. I was told that there were Parsi pilots in the PAF.

We had heard stories about pilots being caught by the civilian mob after ejection. One guy had his own gun put to his head and the trigger pulled. Luckily, the pilot had not loaded it, and the bullets were shoved into a pocket of his G-suit. The crowd shouted 'Russian! Russian!', as they beat him. He was an Anglo-Indian, and could not speak Hindi to save his life. The local police arrived and took him away before too much damage was done.

Another airman was shot down in a dog fight over an enemy airfield. He was captured by local guards. PAF Officers came over in a jeep and took him to their crew room with his guard. There he met the pilot who had shot him down – a senior squadron leader. They shook hands and our young flying officer was de-briefed about his mistakes, which got him shot down. He was told that, he fought well for his experience. Unluckily, his adversary was far more experienced.

This guy was treated well until he was taken away by the MPs (Military Police), who were not so well disposed towards pilots to start with, leave alone a downed enemy pilot.

Some pilots were not so lucky, for we learned from our intelligence that one pilot who was shot down whilst attacking a railhead, was captured by a civilian mob. They beat him mercilessly and dragged him to the town square. There, he was mutilated, tortured and finally, his throat was slit. This was cold-blooded murder.

After hearing this, some of us decided not to remove our ejection seat safety pin. This would prevent us from ejecting in a dire situation, when panic set in. It was better to go down with the aircraft.

Boss told us we could take on targets of opportunity, after engaging our primary target. That meant a sort of free-for-all. He thought we would vent some of our anger that way.

Today, I flew two identical missions with our target being the same rail head in the town close to the border. The first mission was uneventful, but this is what happened in the second: I was to lead a two-aircraft strike with two 1,000-pound bombs and guns. My Number 2 was, like me, a Mumbai boy. We were escorted by Gnats led by my course mate, 'Son of Rock Bedi'. Fate had decided to pitch in our lot for this daunting task.

We struck late evening, with a dusk recovery. One cannot screw up when attacking such a large target. Our bombs were on the button, as Bedi shouted encouragement circling above the yard. I remember him screaming, 'Chak de! Chak de!' over the radio.

In the second pass, I opened up my guns on some built up structures, which could be in use for anything. I could see flashes of anti-aircraft fire coming from the ground, so I gave a pretty long burst. One can see AA fire in front, as you enter the dive, but as you come closer the firing stops. Perhaps, the gunners anticipating your burst scamper for cover.

Number 2 called, 'No Fire' and caught up with me in the turn. Bedi was positioned slightly above, and behind us. I called 480 to give the Gnats some leverage, as I hit the deck. Past experience had shown they had problems keeping up low level.

I must admit that if any fear of getting shot ever went through my mind, it was at the time of a getaway, after the attack was executed. An overwhelming 'get the hell out of here' feeling would come over me. This would vanish on first contact with friendly radar, as we entered our own territory, squawking the designated IFF code (Identify Friend or Foe). It was a relief to hear our own radar's call, 'Blood Stone Leader identified, your tail is clear.' To which I replied, 'All Four', meaning nobody was left behind.

After landing, I saw that I had taken hits under the wing and near the tail cone from small calibre AA fire. Thank God for self-sealing fuel tanks.

During the debrief, Boss asked my Number 2 why he did not fire his guns? He bluntly replied that he would not fire unless he could positively identify the target as being military. He added that some guys were fighting a personal war, but he had nothing personal to settle with the enemy. This elicited no comment from the Boss. This goes to show the latitude given to individual beliefs or principles, even during a war.

Boss then asked me what I had fired at. I told him that I had shot at built-up structures near the yard, possibly storage sheds. Boss gave me a hard look, and told me for the record, 'Opportunity targets meant military targets. 'Yes, sir,' was my reply, and we left.

As the days rolled on, the crowd outside the hotel would swell in the evening and patiently wait to meet us, standing in the cold. That evening, we were blessed by an old woman, who had brought *Karah Parsad* for all of us, after offering prayers for our wellbeing.

Day Thirteen: 16 December 1971, Pathankot

Throughout the last thirteen days, no pilot in our Squadron was bounced and had to engage in air combat. Perhaps, one of the reasons was that an airfield strike was not given to us.

No complaints on that score, for enemy airfields were pretty well defended and their radar cover did not allow for any element of surprise. They were always waiting at action stations when the strike came. Most airfield strikes were also engaged by enemy fighters, both in the approach and get-away phase.

When attacking an airfield, certain points had to be kept in mind. During an attack, if AA fire was encountered, you didn't have to worry about enemy fighters, however, when pressing home the attack you encounter no AA fire, it means that their own fighters are milling around in the same sky. Therefore, lack of AA fire, meant their fighters are on patrol.

Ironically, we had to revise these tactics on the last day, though we did not know it would be so, at the time of flying the mission. I was to be Number 2 in a four-aircraft formation strike, on an enemy airfield. Boss was to lead. Ordnance was two 1,000-pound bombs each. The two MiG escorts were armed with a single gun and wing-mounted air-to-air missiles.

We took off in pairs, with the Boss throwing an orbit for the MiGs to get into position and to then set course. Speed was 420 knots, which afforded manoeuvrability, both in a turn and the vertical plane, if attacked.

Boss's TOT was to the second and the two of us pulled up for the single pass, bomb attack. The MiGs pulled up behind us, creating some lateral separation, so that they could see our tails and would be able to roll on to any bogey, that came between us and the MiGs.

AA fire was seen, so the strike was pressed home, and we were not worried about being attacked. My bombs were unloaded on a hangar, while Boss went for the intersection.

Numbers 3 and 4 continued skirting the airfield, keeping low, so they could clear the tails of both the Hunters and the MiGs above them. We dropped our load, at 3,000 feet AGL (Above Ground Level), turned hard to avoid debris damage, and continued the dive to get low. As we hit the deck, I could see Numbers 3 and 4 pulling up on my right and the MiGs above them, so cross cover was maintained.

I called, 'Tail Clear,' as Boss threw a turn into Numbers 3 and 4, as they pulled out, crossed over right to left, behind and slightly above us, and reversed. This allowed them to quickly join up in an open battle position. The MiGs, who had kept an eye on everything going on below them, dropped one each, outside the flanks of our formation as we set course for base.

We kept our eyes peeled. We must have flown about 20 miles, when the MiG leader called, 'Bogey 4 o'clock, high, 2,000 yards.'

Boss yelled, 'Hard starboard.' We turned level giving her the gun, whilst the MiGs pulled up.

The bogey, a single Mirage had to engage in a turning fight with the Hunters or go for the MiGs. Anyway, he would have been sandwiched.

Fighting six to one, no matter how good your aircraft might be, is not a good idea, even in your own air space.

He did what was the best in his situation. He turned around from his position opened up his burners, and vanished.

Boss called, 'Reverse,' and the formation turned towards home.

Why the single interceptor? Or did we see only one? Perhaps, the Mirage was trying to sneak in a missile attack, but could not get a lookdown lock-on due to the terrain. The important thing was that he was spotted and engaged, before any damage was done.

The recovery was uneventful. Back at the base, Ops AOC called us and said, 'Good job, boys. The war is over. No debrief.' The 'All missions on Standby' signal had come from Western Air Command, when we were still in the air.

Later in the day, came the declaration of a unilateral cease fire by the Prime Minister of India.

We were back at the hotel when it was still day time. The people in the street, stopped to cheer when we arrived. Even the waiters thumped our backs. Lots of handshakes all around. It appeared that the public were generally happy that the war was over.

A distinguished looking Sikh gentleman came over to the hotel to meet us. He introduced himself as the President of the Pathankot Truck Owners Association. He invited us to dinner, at his place that evening. Many prominent business folk were present there. Lots of praise and kudos. Lots of Scotch too.

We hit the sack that night, just happy that it was over and we were lucky to come through in one piece.

38 Years on and Until the Sun Set on Me: 16 December 2009

I read in the news that on 14 December 2009 our Defence Minister informed the Lok Sabha, that his Ministry had received nine boxes of medals returned by retired servicemen to protest the non-settlement of their demand for 'One Rank One Pension'.

Strangely, nobody wanted to know the actual number of medals in those boxes.

No awkward questions were asked.

No mention of any uproar or a heated debate, over this disclosure.

Seems as if it was acceptable to the House, for the ex-servicemen, to take this unprecedented action.

Would this Minister and the Honourable Members be so unperturbed, if this was 14 December 1971? Wonder how many medals in those boxes, were those earned in the 1971 War? Today, I also read that 38 years after this victory, the same Minister has stated that a memorial would be built for those who made the supreme sacrifice in 1971.

I also read about a group of ex-servicemen knocking the doors of the Supreme Court to get justice, from the very country whose freedom they fought for. Have these erstwhile warriors become greedy or unreasonable? The people deserve to know the answer. Strangely, whenever their cases come up for hearing they are decided in their favour.

No one could have ever imagined in 1971, that they would live to see soldiers return the medals earned with their sweat and blood. Battle honours are the pride and glory for which a soldier is ready to die. They are given by our country. Have those soldiers lost faith in the country? It cannot be.

My log book is in front of me. The page open is December 1971. I ask myself, would I do it again?

I realize that some of my comrades did not live to ask this question.

We went out to fight in support of each other, for our squadron and our pride. All of this helped to conquer fear. I would do it again and again, if called upon to do so.

Life has dealt me a good hand, but I can never forget my days as a member of the Battle Axes.

I remember the faces of the widows and small children, whose bread winner never came home.

I owe them. We all owe them. They were ordinary men, who paid with their lives to achieve the extraordinary.

WITH CANBERRAS ON THE WESTERN FRONT

WING COMMANDER K.S. CHANDRASHEKHAR, VM

My experience of the 1971 war began a few days before the outbreak of hostilities. At that time, I was on a ground duty tenure, at CAC, Allahabad. The buzz in the offices and corridors of our building was palpable. There was a detached sense of expectancy.

Meanwhile, in the squadrons, the imminent in the air war meant that all preparations had to be well and truly in place. Unlike the situation in the 1965 war, it was not necessary to induct pilots on ground duty to boost up pilot strength in squadrons. For me, however, the comfort of a desk job away from the action was disconcerting. Call it payback time or an expression of confidence in oneself, built on the back of my 1965 operational experience, I volunteered for action and was quickly assigned to No. 35 Squadron, then based at Pune.

Pune was the launch pad for the Canberra operations aimed at targets in southern Pakistan. The limited range and reach of Canberra aircraft at low level, meant a refuelling halt at Jamnagar on our way out to the targets. It proved to be a welcome break for us, for we got to meet with Group Captain Pete Wilson, VrC, Station Commander Jamnagar, a veteran of Canberra operations and my mentor, in more ways than one.

Of the six night missions that I undertook from Pune, two are worth mentioning here; one for a lucky escape and the other as a sideshow narrative on a night raid.

And so, it was on 8 December 1971, after a reassuring tarmac chat with 'Groupie' Wilson over hot tea on a cold and wintry night, on our way to Drigh Road, a satellite PAF base close to Karachi. Our mission successful, I was down to deck level over the dark waters of the Arabian Sea, heading south, away from the prowling eyes of Pak radar. I felt my body relax, the adrenaline ebbing. Close to Jamnagar, I had just initiated my climb to Pune, when the silence was broken with the calm voice of Groupie Wilson asking me to get down fast. At this moment, I realised I was not the only one in the night sky at that point. Instinctively, I went into a spiral dive, throttled back, speed brakes out to hit the deck, back to the safety of the black and glistening surface of the waters whizzing past below. After what seemed an eternity at low level, I was issued on all clear by Wilson and made my way up again back to Pune, with near dry tanks.

On 9 December, another mission and another tarmac chat with Groupie brought home the reality of the previous night's close call. The Pak chase plane, which had to be an F-102 for it to gain on me so rapidly was picked up by our radar in time to wake me to action. Lucky are the ones that, live to tell a tale another day.

The side show that I mentioned earlier, occurred on the night of 15 December 1971 (the last day of the war).

This was a night raid on the Karachi harbour installations. I was leading a six aircraft raid, and we were off in a stream from Jamnagar, on a circuitous route via Bhuj, approaching the target from the north. Even far out at low level, it was clear that navigation that night was going to be easy. We had a homing beacon in the form of a gigantic inferno lighting up the night sky, that was visible from miles away. Our Hunters and Naval boats had beat us to the job and made our job easy by lighting up the target. Closing in, the leaping flames were riveting and yet distracting. As we made the final bombing run, our bombs hit the target, and flames shot up into the sky. A spectacle that I will remember forever, I thought to myself,

as I sped away with blinking eyes, nodding my head in disbelief, at this rare sight.

PART – 5

Maritime Operations

INS VIKRANT IN THE 1971 WAR

REAR ADMIRAL S. RAMSAGAR, AVSM, VRC, NM

Let me first give you some background to the Bangladesh War, which I am sure all of you are well aware of. I would like to take you all back to those days as I speak of those events.

The Iron Lady of India, Indira Gandhi, accepted General Manekshaw's demand that he be given six months' time to get the three defence forces ready to take on the task of liberating East Pakistan. Such an offensive was not planned during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru probably saw himself as an international statesman, and failed miserably as far as India was concerned. But Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was a leader who took the advice of her staff. She realized that India could not sustain the needs of over one million refugees from East Pakistan. She toured the world to apprise world leaders of what was happening in East Pakistan, and signed a 'Friendship Agreement' with the USSR to ensure India's security against the combined forces of Pakistan, China, and the USA.

Prior to the start of the war, *INS Vikrant* was in dock undergoing a major overhaul. The *Vikrant's* boilers were being repaired. Thanks to the time given by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to the armed forces to get ready, *INS Vikrant* was patched up but the boilers were still not fit to run the carrier at its top speed.

I had relinquished my post as a senior pilot of the Anti-submarine Reconnaissance Squadron, INAS 310, and taken command of the INAS 550 Squadron, when I was recalled to the 310 Squadron as a senior pilot and was deputed to Madras to carry out flying trials for Alize aircrafts off the coast of Madras. The Alize aircraft makes it possible to land on deck, even without the facility of the hook on its arrester gear, it is possible for an experienced carrier pilot to make a safe landing within 400 feet.

The problem was that the carrier's catapult was not ready, and could not be used to get airborne after landing on the ship. Previously, when this had happened, all the Seahawks had to be landed ashore by winch and towed to the airport by road at night. The Alize aircraft, with just 300 litres of fuel and only two crew members, had to do free take-off using the maximum speed of the ship and the additional natural wind off Bombay.

The speed of the carrier was limited to 14 knots. Aircraft operations had to be undertaken with very little fuel and no additional weights. Under these conditions, I had to successfully complete landings and free take-offs from the carrier.

Within two days, Commander Engineers, Commander Chakravarthy was able to work up a speed of 16 knots for the *Vikrant* and I did free take-offs, gradually increasing armaments, and was able to prove that the Alize was capable of operating from the carrier, at its full armament load.

The whole squadron then embarked on the carrier, off Madras, and we were operational by October 1971. By this time, the technical team got the second boiler working and the *Vikrant* was able to go at speeds of 19 to 20 knots. The catapult was also operational. With speeds of 20 knots and the carrier catapult operational, the INAS 300 Squadron Commander, Commander S.K. Gupta carried out the trails with the Seahawk and successfully proved that initially, the fighters could fly at lower heights. By mid-November 1971, both the squadrons were able to fly from the carrier with their full payload of armaments.

The main threat to the *INS Vikrant* was from submarines, especially given that its speed was curtailed because of the boilers. Admiral Nanda, the Chief of Naval Staff, approved Vice Admiral Krishnan's proposal to take

the carrier on to the East coast not only to reduce the likelihood of an attack on the ship but also put her to effective use these. Once the carrier was operational under Captain Suraj Prakash, it was moved to Vishakhapatnam to collect all the stores required for long operations and was finally located, at Port Cornwallis, in the northern Andaman Islands.

The long-range American leased submarine, *PNS Ghazi*, searched for the *Vikrant* off the coast of Madras for a few days and then, having learnt that the *Vikrant* had proceeded to Vishakhapatnam, it followed the carrier there to intercept and sink her. Eventually, the Ghazi was destroyed by her own mines.

On 3 December, Pakistan attacked all Indian airfields in the western sector. Those on board the carrier got the signal to proceed at full speed to attack Dhaka harbour and Chittagong. The Seahawks struck Chittagong airfield in the early hours of 4 December. The Alizes were to surveil the carrier and ships sailing off the mouth of the Dhaka Estuary. Unfortunately, we had orders to strike only at enemy merchant ships. All merchant vessels sighted by the Alizes had their names changed and, women and children were standing out on deck, waving a white cloth, as a result, our aircraft were not allowed to strike them. It is now understood that much of the money and gold from East Pakistan was transported by the Pakistani officials on these ships.

At the start of the war, the Indian Government announced a blockade of all ports in Pakistan, but within three hours, it was lifted because of the International Law implications. After the third day, however, they re-issued the blockade notice only to the ports of East Pakistan and Karachi. That day, Dhaka harbour was struck during the day by Seahawks and during the night, the Alizes carried out bombing raids.

Night bombing raids on Chittagong airport were carried out on the 4th day of the war by three Alizes flown in line formation, five lengths apart with three 500-pound bombs in each aircraft. Chittagong was bombed from a high level of 5,000 feet above the airfield. This was done because we were told that the heavy anti-aircraft fire was not effective at that height. After we dropped our bombs, we were surprised that there was no enemy

air opposition. We did see two AA guns firing, but their tracers did not reach that high. Later, we learned from IAF Canberra recce photos that a neat line of craters was seen on the right edge of the runway. Due to the high-level bombing, the wind drift took the bombs slightly to the right.

The next night, we flew four aircraft to bomb Dhaka harbour. There was no air activity at all by the Pakistani Air force. We later learnt that the last few Sabres based at the Chittagong airfield had flown to Burma, on 3 December itself, as they were unsure of their safety at the airfield. This time, we could descend to 1,000 feet and drop our 500-pound bombs directly on all the harbour installations. We saw that all the ships along the jetties were in no condition to sail. There was no opposition at all. We then picked our targets and fired six rockets each, one by one. Thereafter, all the aircraft returned to the carrier, in formation. All this while, one Alize would fly day and night giving surveillance cover to the carrier formation of the *Vikrant* and the two frigates *Beas* and *Kamortha*, commanded by Commander Ramdas (who later retired as the CNS) and Captain Manohar Awati (who retired as a vice admiral C-in-C West).

On 6 December 1971, the Fleet Commander felt that we were neglecting the western sector of Bangladesh. So, I was dispatched on a daylight mission, as there was no air opposition from the Pakistan Air Force. I flew all the way up the Murtha Mullah river and I found six large merchantmen anchored in line along the river, at the Khulna river port. As I was carrying only rockets and depth charges (which do not function in shallow, muddy waters), I could use only rockets for attacking these ships. I used one rocket on each ship. I could not see the effect of the attack, as the rockets hit their mark. Later, I learned that the attack did kill some people on the vessels. There were no guns aboard the ships to fire back at me. After expending all the rockets, I proceeded further up the river to Chalna and found no ships at the small jetty and no activity in the harbour.

The same night, the Fleet Commander decided to attack these merchant ships, which were obviously there to evacuate Pakistani troops. We timed the attack at 0220 hrs, when the moon was expected to rise. Commander Ravi Dhir and I in two Alizes with 500-pound bombs attacked these ships

from the west side. Immediately, heavy anti-aircraft fire erupted around us, with tracers coming directly at our aircraft, but missing us by a few feet. Ravi decided that we should drop the remaining bombs on the harbour installations, at Chalna port, which we did, and returned to the ship.

Rear Admiral Sharma, realizing that the merchantmen would sail away from the Khulna port directed the frigate *INS Beas* to proceed immediately to the mouth of the Mutha Mulla river and intercept these vessels if they tried to make a break for it. The next morning, as they lifted anchor, they found *INS Beas* blocking their exit. Thereupon, they broke away in different directions. Commander Ramdas made a desperate call to Rear Admiral Sharma, saying that he could not stop all vessels, as they were scattering in different directions. At this time, the Seahawks were returning after a bombing strike on Dhaka. The Fleet Commander on the *INS Vikrant* directed them to proceed straight to the spot and engage these ships. The six Seahawks struck them with front guns. Immediately, all the merchant ships stopped and obeyed the orders of our warship. They formed a convoy and following the orders of our warship and proceeded to Diamond Harbour in India, under the control of Lieutenant Commander Raj Bazaz, the Executive Officer of *INS Beas*.

On 8 December, Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram declared that India would not hesitate to knock out the American carrier *USS Enterprise*, if it entered Indian waters with its escort vessels. The news was that the American Pacific fleet had sailed under the orders of the American President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to proceed to the Bay of Bengal. In view of this report, I was dispatched towards the Andaman Islands to provide surveillance reports on the approaching American fleet, using radar and passive radar detection equipment. I climbed up to 21,000 feet, which is the maximum height the Alize aircraft can attain. At this height, the oxygen content in the air is less than one fifth of the normal. We crossed Port Cornwallis, in the Andaman Islands and could see no contacts in the Malacca Straits on the radar. Further, our radar detection equipment did not pick up any radar transmission from the American fleet. It was understood that the Russian Admiral Gorshkov

managed to convince the Americans not to get involved in this local war. He asked the US to switch on their satellite cameras at 0815 hours that morning, and he ordered all the Russian war submarines to surface for 10 minutes. The US satellites saw that Russian submarines were at battle stations around USA and Europe.

On 10 December, during my usual reconnaissance sortie to check any new developments in the Chalna and Khulna areas, I found in the river, moving out to the southern mouth, a large gunboat towing three long Catamaran-like long boats, full of soldiers camouflaged with leaves and tree branches, heading out to sea. I immediately attacked it with the six rockets carried in my wings. All the rockets fell around the gunboat, but not on it. This type of strike is called the straddle, it is a very effective tactic.

As all my rockets were expended, I had no choice but to strike the gunboat with the depth charges that I had in the bay. For a depth charge attack, one has to fly at deck level and drop the bombs. I had already noted that the gunboat was firing its AA gun, and we were sure to be hit if we carried out the depth charge attack at the required height. I had to ask my crew whether they were up to this, all of them agreed that we couldn't let the troops escape to Dhaka.

I started the run-in at 100 feet and must have run over the ship at 30 feet, dropping our three depth charges, when we were hit by the 20 mm AA rounds. The Pak gunner did not know that in our aircraft, the pilot sits on the left, and the navigator and the radar operator sits on the right of the centre line. The gunner just aligned his gun to the centre line of the aircraft, as we passed overhead. All his rounds missed the front engine and went through the cockpit, missing us by inches, and because of their high muzzle velocity eight of these rounds went through the aircraft without exploding within the cockpit. Unfortunately, the last round hit the heavy cross bar of the radar dome and exploded at the aft of the rear seat operator, but did not injure him. The aircraft lost all hydraulic fuel. I had to lower the undercarriage by gravity and wobble the plane to have it locked. Thereafter, I lowered the hook into down position, again by gravity. We lost all power, but the battery was able to operate the VHF radio, albeit weakly. As I pulled

up the aircraft, we could see that the gunboat had been hit by the depth charge, they had hoisted a white flag and had beached the boats on the banks of the river.

We had to return to the *Vikrant* at slow speed, with under carriage and the hook lowered down by gravity. The carrier wanted to put up the net for recovering my plane, but I informed them that we would do a normal night landing, using the hook, and arrester wires. I am proud to say that the plane was repaired overnight and made fit for flying, the next morning. After I brought my plane back, I realised that it was moments like there the ground crew really felt that they were part of the battle. One needs to understand that the aircrew strikes directly at the enemy with their aircraft, but the squadron ground crew do not directly experience the battles the way that pilots of fighter aircraft do. I remember my squadron's ground crew carrying me on their shoulders. My aircrew and I, all three of us, were awarded the Vir Chakra by signal, during the war itself.

The final surrender of the Pakistani armed forces in East Pakistan took place on 16 December 1971. As the Pakistani armed forces had no escape route, due to the capture and sinking of all their merchant ships meant for their evacuation, 93,000 armed defence forces surrendered to the Indian Army.

For the first time in the history of India, a country was liberated by joint operations of the armed forces of India.

THE RIDDLE OF *PNS GHAZI*

COMMODORE K.P. MATHEW, AVSM

During the period approaching the 1971 Indo-Pak War, I was undergoing specialization training, at the Torpedo and Anti-Submarine (TAS) School, at the Kochi Naval Base. Well before the war, courses were suspended and all the trainees were deputed across various navy stations. I was appointed as the Naval Officer in Charge, Vishakhapatnam, at the Port Defence HQ (PDHQ).

On 3 December 1971, I was on duty, when we received the news of the pre-emptive dusk strike by the PAF on Indian air bases at 1800 hrs. This set in motion preparations for the attack, operation centres were activated and we were to be alert, and prepared for combat at any time.

We had been informed that the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be addressing the nation on the night of 3-4 December. The address was delayed and while we waited we received a report from the Port War Signal Station (PWSS), that overlooked the approaches to the port and kept a watch over it, that they had heard and felt a loud explosion that shook the ground and rattled the windowpanes. On looking out, they saw a big plume of water going up high into the sky, at a distance from them. When the report came in nothing much was done about it, since everybody was keen to hear the PM. Further, since there was no known naval activity in that area, the report was relayed to the Maritime Operations Room (MOR).

That very night, fishermen picked up pieces of metal, rubber and wires, etc., caught in their nets while fishing a few miles off the port entrance channel. These were brought to the naval base during the day on 4 December. The debris, which included life jackets, revealed that their source was a warship, possibly a submarine. The fishermen also reported the presence of an oil slick in the area. On 5 December, the Seaward Defence Boat, *INS Akshay* sailed with a diving team to the location. The team quickly located the wreck and, from the shape, size and markings, positively identified it as that of the submarine, *PNS Ghazi*. This was a US Navy Tench class diesel electric submarine of Second World War vintage, originally called *USS Diablo*, which had been on lease to the Pakistan Navy since 1963.

While these developments were taking place, it was finally my turn to participate in the operation. I was assigned the command of the requisitioned fishing trawler, *Laxmirani*. The trawler belonged to the Union Carbide company, who were testing the waters for diversifying into fishing. The trawler was of American origin, with a fishing expert on board to teach the Indian crew. Within a few hours of being given that task, I took command of the ship at Port Trust berth. My team included a crew of twelve, including an officer who had been pulled out from the initial, or the Sub Lieutenants, course. The trawler, with all her fishing gear removed, landed ashore. She was sailed to the naval dockyard, fitted with stands for machine guns, and provided with guns, rifles, demolition charges, signalling gear, codebooks, and other essentials for a warship.

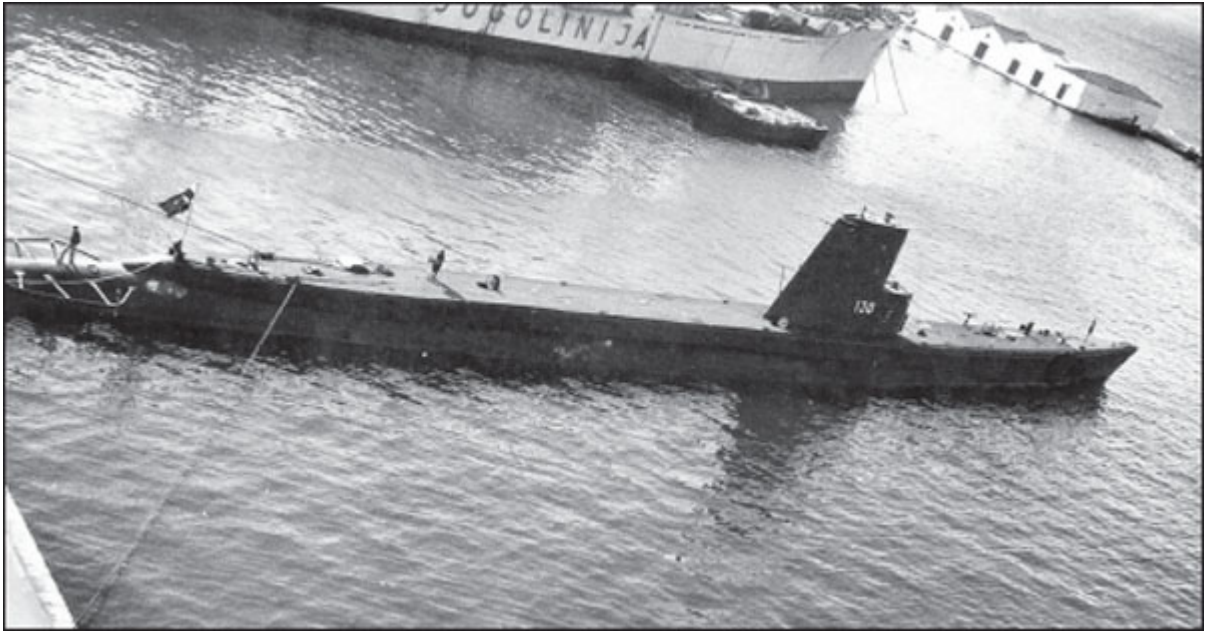
Once it was established that the wreck was that of *PNS Ghazi*, the submarine rescue ship *INS Nistar* was tasked with locating and sending diving teams down to the wreck. Locating the wreck was accomplished without much ado, since the *Ghazi* was discharging oil, whose surface trail in the prevailing current could be picked from miles away. All that was required was to trace the very visible oil slick to its origin. On 6 December, *Nistar* anchored north of the wreck and dropped astern to position itself over the submarine wreck. Divers then descended, located the wreck, and attached it to a strong line, the other end of which was secured to *Nistar*.

Once the line was in place, subsequent divers only had to go down along the line to reach the submarine.

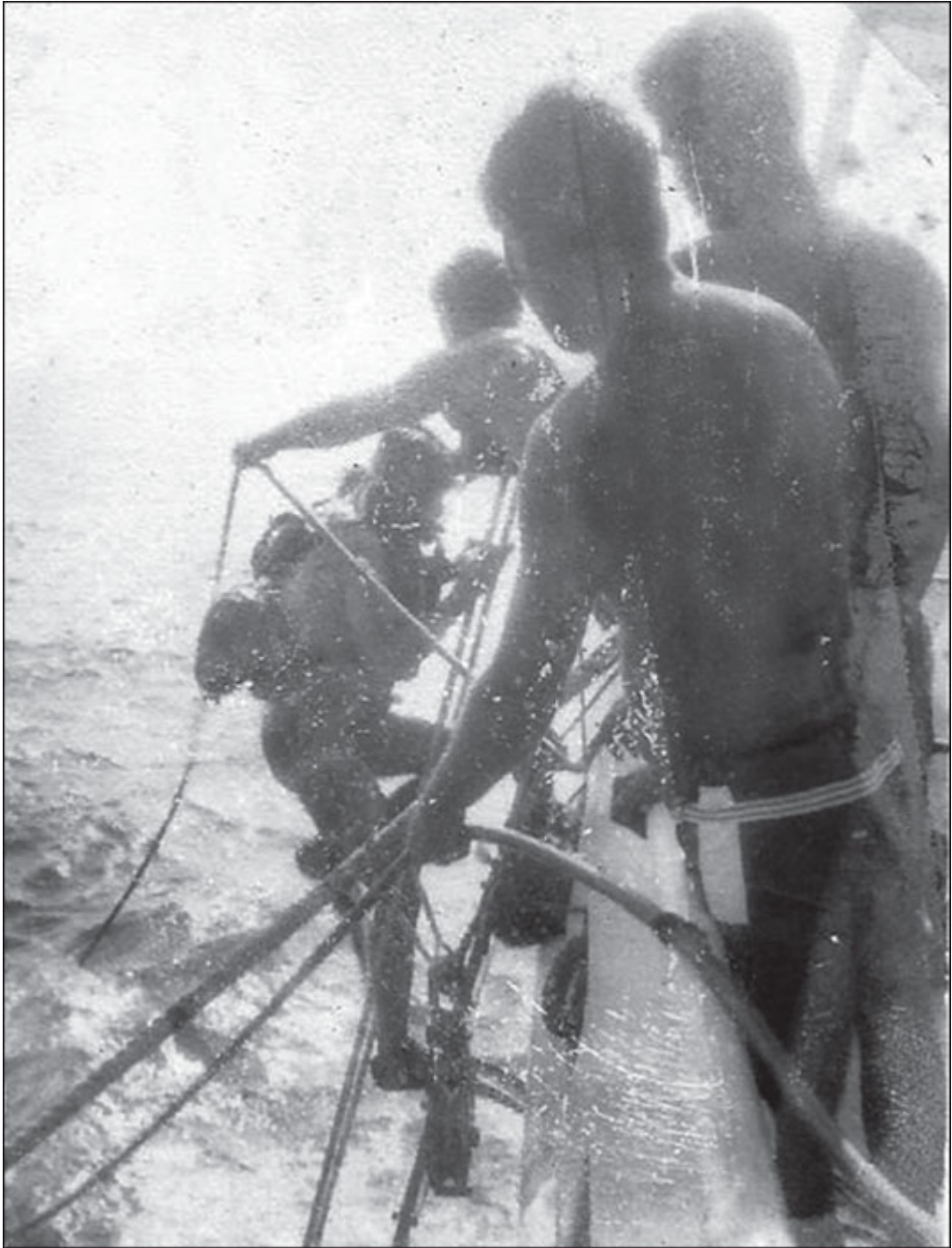
Having marked the submarine and finished a general, external examination, the next job was to blast open the internally sealed hatch to enter inside. With such access, further diving effort was to recover material of intelligence value from the submarine. There was then a steady stream of various items that were brought up to the *Nistar*.

When the trawler *Laxmirani* came on the scene, our task, initially, was to patrol the approaches to Vishakhapatnam. The ship had good radar and with that, we could keep a keen eye on all the surface ship movements off the port. Once the *Nistar* started accumulating material from the *Ghazi*, we were tasked with one or two sorties to collect the material from her, enter the harbour, and hand them over at the naval jetty.

Being a qualified diver, I requested and obtained permission to dive down to the *Ghazi*, along with the other divers. It was an experience still etched in my memory. The *Ghazi* was lying at about four nautical miles (7.5 kms) from the harbour entrance channel, at a depth of around 40 meters. The sea being clear, the visibility underwater was good at about five metres or so. The first view, as one went down, was of the submarine appearing to be intentionally sitting on the seabed. She was vertical and even. Closer scrutiny revealed that there was major damage to the forward area. This is the compartment in which a submarine carries her torpedoes or, alternatively, mines in launch tubes. Some three to four metres right forward, having been blasted off, was missing. The next similar length was split open and various air bottles and the launch tubes with jagged ends were visible.



A file photo of *PNS Ghazi*.



Diving down to *PNS Ghazi*.

Once the divers had succeeded in entering the submarine, they brought out a wide variety of material. These included logbooks, charts, message files, spool-type tape recorder tapes on which high-speed submarine broadcasts were recorded, and loose equipment such as torches, etc. In the

time between the recovery of the material and handing them over at the jetty, it was possible to have a look at many of these. Most of the equipment had USN (United States Navy) or United States Ship (USS) *Diablo* markings. The items of intelligence value were used and analyzed to reconstruct the operational deployment and activities of the *Ghazi*.

There has been much debate and speculation on what had made the *Ghazi* end up the way she did. While her wartime mission to seek and destroy the *INS Vikrant* was reconstructed from the records recovered from the wreck, what caused her to sink has remained in the realm of speculation. The damages that were seen definitely appeared to me as attributable to an internal explosion in the forward part. It was also clear that this explosion had finished her. What caused the explosion is however unclear—was it a torpedo or mine that she was carrying in the forward part that accidentally went off internally, or was it excessive accumulation of hydrogen from the lead acid batteries that were ignited? Given the intensity of the explosion, which could be heard and felt more than 10 kms away on the coast, it is likely that explosion was caused by the huge amount of high explosives going off with the torpedo warhead or a mine.

The hostilities ended with the signing of the instrument of surrender on 16 December 1971, and then demobilization started. *Laxmirani* was handed back to Union Carbide. Those of us who were pulled out of training courses returned to the schools to continue where we had left off.

CLEARING THE *PNS GHAZI* MINEFIELD

COMMODORE K.P. MATHEW, AVSM

The *PNS Ghazi* chapter did not end for me with the 1971 Indo-Pak War. The link continued even after I went back after the war to complete the interrupted specialization course, to become a full-fledged Torpedo Anti-Submarine (TAS) officer.

The TAS specialization encompassed all aspects of warfare below the surface, which a ship had to deal with. Hence, being such a specialist included dealing with mines or Mine Counter Measures (MCM) besides the primary area of anti-submarine warfare. My first appointment after specialization was as the Squadron MCM Officer of the 18 MCM Squadron. After the war, the ships of the squadron were deployed for clearing the mines laid by the Pak Navy, in the approaches to the ports of the newly formed nation – Bangladesh. While this task was on-going, the senior ship of the squadron to which I was appointed – the *INS Cannanore*, developed engine problems because of which she was sent to the Vishakhapatnam naval dockyard for repairs. Hence, I joined the ship there on 28 June 1972.

During this period, a cargo ship, soon after departing from Vishakhapatnam, suffered a massive underwater explosion. The Master of the ship, who was of British origin and a veteran from the Second World War, was certain that the explosion which caused such crippling internal

damages as uprooting of the shaft with the plummer block, buckling of plates, toppling of the gyro and so on could only have been due to an underwater explosion from a ground mine (a mine lying on the sea bed), such as those laid by submarines and aircraft. This event set in motion a chain of developments.

It was not difficult to surmise that the mine could only have originated from the *Ghazi*, which lay sunk around the approaches to the port, since no other hostile combatant was known to have come that way. The intelligence gathered from the material recovered by divers from the submarine, indicated that she was carrying mines. If the *Ghazi* was indeed on a mine-laying mission, was the mine that exploded the only one that she laid, or were there more? The only prudent way ahead was to assume that several had been planted and to take action to clear them by controlled activation.

While these developments were unfolding, the *INS Cannanore* completed her repairs and was charged with undertaking an assessment (or an appreciation, in military parlance) of the threat from the mines that could have been laid by the *Ghazi* and to take counter measures to neutralize them. This exercise involved an assessment of the outer limit of the area within which the mines could have been laid, taking note of the maximum depth to which ground mines are effective and the most likely areas considering the routes taken by ships while approaching or leaving the port.

Mini actuation systems have a number of measures in place to complicate mine counter measures such as delay in mine becoming active, ship count (number of times the mine is by ships before it will go off); the multiple influences of the ship (magnetic, acoustic or sound and pressure signatures) that are likely to set off the mines, and their sensitivity based on the size and type of intended targets and so on. The result was the demarcation of the sea area likely to be mined and the expected characteristics of the mines. With this information, the plan and manner in which the minesweeping was to be conducted was formulated.

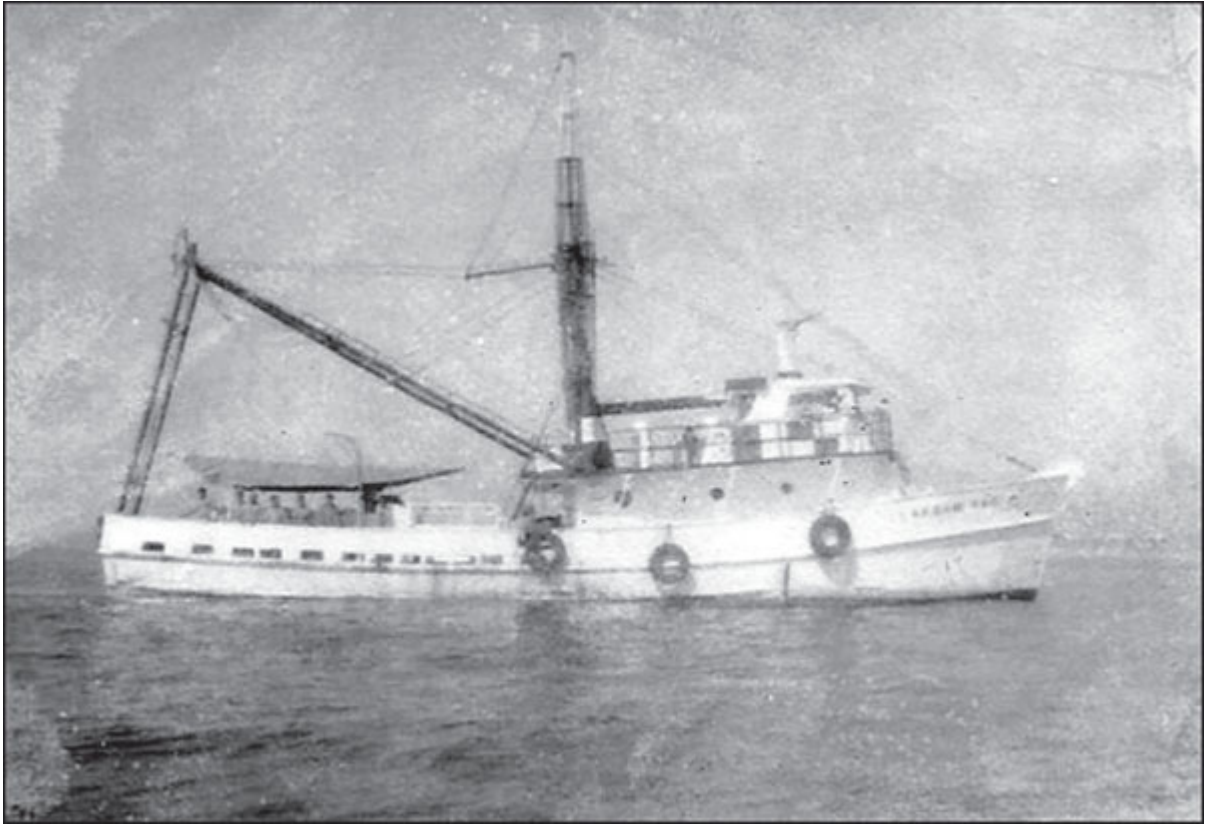
The *Cannanore* being the only minesweeper available locally, we were assigned the task. The operation lasted three weeks. The ship started the sweep runs from outside the likely mined area, clearing the first lane,

extending into it, reversing at the outer end, returning now along the first lane and clearing the second lane and so on until all lanes in the area are cleared, fulfilling the required number of runs per lane. The strategy was to create magnetic and acoustic signatures of such intensity that they were many orders higher than those produced by the ships targeted by the mines. By doing so, the minesweeper expected to fool the mine into setting off at a distance safe enough for the ship to weather the resulting explosion.

The sweep gear consisted of one set for the magnetic and another set for the acoustic sweeps. The magnetic sweep was a long loop of thick cable that formed a heart shape pattern of some 300 meters, astern the ship. The heart shape was achieved by attaching various metal gadgets called kites and depressors, and marked by floats. With the flow of water, these gadgets took the cable to either side and submerged it to the desired streaming depth. Heavy current was pulsed through the cable to generate a magnetic field around them. The acoustic sweep gear had gadgets that generated noise like a watertight drum which had an electrically operated hammer that banged against it. Different gadgets and methods were used to generate varied frequencies. While the ship had the magnetic sweep astern, the acoustic sweeps were lowered and operated from both the sides.

Accurate navigation was necessary to proceed along the lanes with intervals as close as 50 metres. Those were the days before the electronic and satellite based position-fixing systems such as GPS were in vogue. We had to go by visual means. Horizontal angles between two sets of selected prominent shore objects were measured at regular intervals, by two teams, in tandem, using the sextant. The obtained angles were checked against the angular grid marked web and the position thus determined.

The sweeping was done from dawn to dusk, without a break. The process of streaming and recovering all the sweep gear was an exacting task, lest they come in all jumbled or damaged. Since the danger of setting off a mine was ever present, all personnel, save a few who were required to keep an eye on the engines, were made to stay on the upper decks with life jackets on.



A file picture of the trawler *Laxmirani*.

We completed the allotted task and reported the area cleared. However, no mine was exploded in this process. The fact that neither the sweeping done by the *Cannanore* nor the multitudes of ships that have crossed these waters since 1971, without a mine incident leads one to conclude that the *PNS Ghazi* had managed to lay only one mine before she met her end.

THE MISSILE BOAT OPERATIONS

COMMODORE VIJAY JERATH, VRC

Introduction

In mid-1969, a group of 100 officers and 200 sailors were selected to form the 25 Missile Boat Squadron. After three months of language training in India, they departed for Vladivostok, USSR. There the men underwent extensive training on the missile boat and its equipment, including the all-powerful P-15 missile. In May 1970, towards the end of the theoretical training, Captain KK Nayyar, (later to retire as the vice-chief of the Navy as Vice Admiral) initiated a dialogue with the commanding officers as to whether the missile boats could be used for offensive operations. After that conversation, the commanding officers were convinced that in case Pakistan ever dared to attack India again, the missile boats would be launched to strike Karachi.

Accordingly, a seven-page top secret paper was prepared. Since the total range of the boats was less than the distance from Bombay to Karachi, this paper discussed ways of high speed towing and fuelling en route and strategies to assault Karachi. This secret paper was delivered by hand to Naval Headquarters.

At the helm of affairs was the wartime Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral S.M. Nanda. He not only believed in the principle of war of Offensive Spirit but manifested it in his actions as well. He decided that the missile boats

would be launched against the Pakistani port city. Thus, the plan became a reality—in case India was attacked.

Seeing the small size of the boats and their limited endurance, many in the Navy were against this idea, since these vessels had primarily been built to defend harbours and the coastline, venturing not more than a hundred miles or so into the sea. The Chief of the Naval Staff with his ‘Offensive Spirit’ delivered a verdict: ‘Fall in line or I will replace you.’ Most fell in line, some reluctantly. They continued to fear that sending the missile boats to Karachi would be suicidal in view of retaliatory attacks by the Pakistan Air Force.

By mid-1971, the situation on the Eastern border was getting to be tense and unmanageable, in view of the huge influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tried to appeal to the world leaders to reason with Pakistan to stop the mayhem and genocide in the East, but her pleas fell on deaf ears.

Sometime in October 1971, Admiral Nanda walked into the office of the Prime Minister and specifically asked if her government would have any objection to the Navy attacking Karachi. After a bit of thought Prime Minister replied, ‘Well, Admiral, if there is a war, there is a war.’ Admiral Nanda thanked the Prime Minister and left.

The armed forces of India were in a co-operative mood, as were the intelligence services. Their joint assessment was that Pakistan was planning a major offensive on the Western front, with a view to capturing vast tracts of land to barter for East Pakistan, where they were incurring heavy losses. In November, Pakistan’s submarines put out to sea and the assessment was that an attack by Pakistan on our western borders was imminent. The Indian armed forces were waiting in readiness. The Navy initially planned to launch two missile boat operations. One immediately after Pakistan attacked and the second a couple of days later.

Operation Trident

On the afternoon of 11 December the five ships of the Trident Force, *Kiltan*, *Katchal*, *Nipat* (with K-25 aboard who is the officer in charge of the squadron), *Veer*, and *Nirghat* rendezvoused near Porbandar, on the Saurashtra coast. After briefing by K-25 via a loud hailer, the force set sail westward at 24 knots to get well clear of the Indian coast.

Just around 1945 hours, *Kiltan* picked up a radar contact westward and altered course of the formation to 280 degrees, at right angles to the course for Karachi. The boat's captain ordered to engage the contact with missiles. Bahadur on board *Nipat* found this to be a furry echo and classified it as a false contact. A series of messages were exchanged with *Kiltan*. Finally, *Katchal* also concurred that there was no radar contact, thereby averting a missile being fired at a phony contact.

Many sailors in the navy, were apprehensive about air strikes by the Pakistan Air Force, however they did not have night capability and their range was 150 nautical miles. Hence, it was decided that the Indian naval forces would enter within the 150 miles arc of Karachi at nightfall, and clear out by dawn the next morning. *Kiltan's* fiasco had cost the Trident Force 30 to 45 minutes. This would greatly affect their destruction capability later.

After dismissing the false contact, the missile boats altered course back to 010 degrees towards Karachi and put on 28 knots. *Kiltan* was facing trouble with her gas turbines. Their whine was making communications with the rest of the group difficult. Furthermore, she began to fall back.

In the early part of the night, a signal was received from the Western Naval Command Headquarters that Petyas frigates were to accompany the missile boats throughout. *Kiltan* assumed that this entailed that she would remain OTC (in charge of operations) throughout. However, K-25 and others were very clear that within 75 miles of Karachi, K-25 will take over as the OTC. This actually did not matter, since *Kiltan* fell back quite a bit from the rest of the force.

A little after 2130 hours, *Veer* developed a major fire in its engine room. The vessel had to be stopped and with the help of the entire company, the fire was extinguished. This made the boat drop behind quite a bit from

Nipat. However, after repairs, the boat tried its best to put on higher speed to catch up with the latter.

At about 2200 hours, the position on the chart indicated that the missile group was within 75 miles off Karachi. As per previous orders, *Nirghat* switched on her radar. Soon she picked up a fast moving contact on her port bow. The closing speed was about 60 knots and it was classified as a warship. Having taken permission from K-25, *Nirghat* fired her first missile at about 2310 hours and according to the procedure turned back to avoid closing further at speed, since the contact was doing about 30 knots. *Nirghat* observed on her radar that the contact had slowed down to six knots, but was still painting on her radar. She took permission once again from K-25, turned around, and fired her second missile at 2320 hours. The contact was seen on the radar as breaking into two. The first half sank immediately, and the second half soon thereafter. At about 20 miles southwest of Karachi is the watery grave of the mighty *PNS Khyber*. It is ironical that during 1965, she had bombarded the sand dunes off Dwarka and her crew declared that they were the mighty ‘Ghaznavis’, who were ready to eat the Indians alive!

When *Nirghat* was turning back to fire her second missile, she was surprised to see a Petya frigate close by and on a reciprocal course. In fact, K-25 had earlier directed *Katchal* to stay close to *Nirghat* throughout and she had taken station half a mile astern of *Nirghat* and stuck to her like a leech. *Nirghat* had not received this signal. Apparently, propagation conditions in that area were not very good and communications between the units suffered.

A little after 2300 hours, *Nipat* picked up a large contact right ahead. Bahadur initially thought that it might be the Pakistani cruiser *Babur*. Just as *Nirghat* was firing her second missile, *Nipat* launched her first missile at the contact ahead. It seemed to slow down. A second missile was fired shortly thereafter, and the contact blew up in a huge explosion and disappeared from *Nipat*'s radar. Later, it turned out that this was the merchant ship *Venus Challenger*, which was carrying ammunition to Karachi. *Nipat* continued to speed towards Karachi at 28 knots.

Having reversed course for about 10 minutes, *Nirghat* had fallen to about seven miles on the port quarter of *Nipat*, and found it difficult to catch up with the latter. Meanwhile, *Nipat* continued to close in on Karachi at 28 knots. It was weighing on the mind of K-25 to fire at Karachi and get outside the 150-mile arc by dawn the next day.

Soon after *Nipat's* firing, *Veer* picked up a contact ahead, sought permission from K-25 and fired a missile. The contact blew up. It turned out to be the Pakistani minesweeper *Muhafiz*. Because of its wooden hull, the vessel disintegrated so fast that she did not have time to even make an emergency SOS to Karachi.

Having sailed within 18 miles of Keamari oil farms, on the night 4/5 December *Nipat* fired a third missile at her target. K-25 gave the 'Angaar' signal on HF (high frequency radio) for all in force and to shore authorities. Angaar was the code word for the successful completion of Operation Trident. *Nipat* reversed course and for reasons not clear, switched off her radar. All units turned back and independently headed back towards the R/V off the Saurashtra coast.

Analysis

Vessels of Operation Trident sank the mighty destroyer *Khyber*, ammunition-laden ship *Venus Challenger* and the minesweeper *Muhafiz*. Also the Keamari oil farms was hit, and the fires raged on for three days and nights.

Because of the urgency to get outside the 150-mile arc from Karachi by dawn, the force did not wait to regroup, which might have cost 15 precious minutes. Five operational missiles came back to Bombay, without being fired. Of course, the main culprit was the wastage of time earlier in the night caused by the false contact of *Kiltan*. Nevertheless, Operation Trident brought the Indian Navy into the 'Hot Missile Age'. The Pakistan Navy earlier thought that they had been attacked from the air. This belief continued for some time, they could not imagine that the small missile boats

of the Indian Navy could have come so far north to cause such massive damage. They retreated en masse into Karachi harbour.

Operation Python

The Western Fleet sailed out of Bombay harbour in the forenoon of 2 December 1971. Accompanying the fleet were missile boats *Vijeta*, commanded by A.R. Parti and *Vinash*, which was skippered by me. Earlier around 25 November, the Fleet Commander, Rear Admiral Chandy Kuruvilla, had sent for me. Handing over a thick envelope marked 'Top Secret', he told me that he should normally have handed this over to me at sea. However, he trusted me completely and added that the situation was getting to be very tense and war could break out at any moment. He intended to take the fleet out to sea and I would accompany him. At an opportune moment, he wanted me to attack Karachi. He told me to study the contents of the envelope very carefully as it contained orders for Operation Python. He also reminded me to guard the envelope with my life. By the morning of 4 December, *Vijeta* had a breakdown and was sent back to Bombay. Also, *Kuthar* suffered a major engine room failure. With *Kirpan* towing and *Khukri*, captained by M.N. Mulla, F-14 providing ASW (Anti-submarine warfare) cover, the 14 Frigate Squadron returned to Bombay.

I remained undertow until late afternoon of 6 December, when the Fleet Commander ordered the 15 Frigate Squadron and *Kadmat*, a Petya class ship, to escort me and proceed to Karachi. By evening the sea was churning up and my steering gear broke down. With excellent expertise available aboard *Vinash*, the defect was soon rectified. By early night, due to a mix up between the fleet and Naval Headquarters, the attack was called off and we were asked to re-join *Mysore*. Personally, I am very glad that this happened as by midnight and beyond, the sea got really rough. Even if I had managed to fire my missiles at Karachi, sailing in the high waves would not have been possible at more than 10 to 12 knots. The Python force would have thus found itself well within the firing range of Pakistan's Air Force.

On joining, I was stationed half a mile astern of *Mysore*. By midnight, the sea became so rough that all my crew fell seasick and I was left alone on the bridge. The sea, remained rough until 7 December.

When I woke up the following morning and came up on the bridge, the sea was calm and flat like a mirror. In the forenoon, I was fuelled and the Fleet Commander asked me if I was ready to go. I was more than willing. *Trishul*, captained by 'Curly' Nair was the OTC and *Talwar*, commanded by S.S. Kumar accompanied me. Since I had been at sea for nearly six days and was on my way to Karachi, I took permission from the OTC and checked all four missiles. They were all in good condition and ready to be fired. We proceeded towards Karachi on a 045 degree course at 25 knots.

In the late afternoon, *Trishul* and *Talwar* picked up radio transmissions on Pakistan's frequency, reporting our position. On closing, we found a low-hulled craft, which was manoeuvring at high speed. It finally took *Talwar* to fire a 4.5 inch gun salvo to blow the craft to smithereens. Two men dressed in diver's suits were seen jumping into the sea the radio transmissions ceased. After this, I was positioned ahead of the escorts and the force assumed an arrowhead formation.

A little after 2000 hours, I switched on my radar 'Rangout' and picked up a contact ahead. It was on a reciprocal course and the Rangout estimated its speed as 22 knots. I wanted to prepare a missile for firing, but the calm voice of the OTC informed me to leave it alone as it was a neutral ship. Missile squadron did have itchy fingers.

It was around 2045 hours, when *Vinash* had a complete power failure. I had my powerful batteries, which would look after the gyro compasses, my auto-pilot, and log. These would also enable me to fire my missiles. The only casualty was the radar Rangout. We had complete expertise on board to rectify the defect. Not to alarm the OTC, I made a simple signal, '*My radar non-operational. In case it does not come on in time, request one ship takes station exactly one mile astern and pass me bearings and ranges of contacts for me to fire my missiles.*' The reply was a simple, '*Roger, out.*'

A little after 2300 hours, electrical power was restored and the Rangout was switched on. I found a cluster of ships about 15 nautical miles ahead

and reported to the OTC. He said, 'These are your targets.'

I fixed the ship's position and found that we had drifted eight to nine miles north-northeast ward, ahead and to the port. The cluster of ships was to my starboard. As I plotted the course to steer towards the objective, the parallel ruler passed through Keamari oil farms. Hence, these also became a target.

I fired the first missile at 2315 hours, with range and homing head range set to maximum in manual mode. This hit the Keamari farm. The second missile was fired at the biggest echo in the cluster. It blew up and the sympathetic detonation severely damaged a ship anchored nearby. The third missile was fired at another big echo and it sank. By this time, I began to wonder if the Pakistani naval ships were also anchored within the cluster. For the fourth missile I chose a smaller echo, which was anchored at the farther end of the cluster. The time was 2330 hours and range was 12.5 miles, it turned out to be the tanker, *PNS Dacca*. The vessel was severely damaged but was saved from sinking by the valiant efforts of her commanding officer.

Analysis

Operation Trident had tied up the Pakistani Navy inside the harbour. Operation Python ensured that every merchant ship and aircraft started seeking permission from New Delhi to move in and out of Karachi, resulting in an effective blockade of Karachi, without a single India naval unit being in the vicinity.

CONCLUSION

While war is an extension of the politics of nations, it ultimately falls to the soldier's lot to face combat on the ground, at sea and in the air. Schooled in the culture of 'Service before Self', personnel of the Armed Forces of India and the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh faced the challenges of the 1971 war head on, turning adversity into opportunity and overcoming impossible situations with courage and commitment.

The stories in this book provide a fresh insight into the ordeals faced by these combatants, and will hopefully transform the reader's understanding of life and death situations in war. There are very few human beings who have had the privilege of leading men into battle. This privilege carries with it an awesome responsibility accompanied by precise but timely discernment and understanding, at times, an onus on very young shoulders.

Going into attack with the possibility that the next moment could be your last, throws up a gamut of emotions, ranging from fear to exhilaration and on to relief at finally making it out alive.

This, however, is conditioned by the knowledge that close companions have made the ultimate sacrifice and are not around anymore. What comes to mind is the message at the War Cemetery at Kohima that says:

*When you go back, tell them and say
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.*

These stories tell us how the Indian Air Force knocked the Pakistani Air Force out of the skies on the eastern front; how the Indian Navy took the war into Pakistan and destroyed the will of the Pakistani Navy to enter into battle, and how the Indian Army relentlessly forged into enemy territory,

wrapping up the war in just thirteen days. However, this book does not tell all the stories of the Indo-Pak War of 1971. There are many stories yet to be told, and we wait in hopeful anticipation for more veterans to come forward and tell us their stories, so that future generations can learn and be inspired.

GLOSSARY OF MILITARY TERMS

2iC	Second-in-Command
FUP	Forming Up Place
AA	Assembly Area
SL	Start Line
RP	Regimental Police
BC	Battery Commander
OP	Observation Post
BOP	Border Outpost
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
GPO	Gun Position Officer
FBO	Fire by Observation
SOS	Save Our Souls
H hr	Time of commencement of an operation
HQ	Headquarter
Coy	Company
Pl	Platoon
Sec	Section
Bn	Battalion
Bdy	Boundary
Div	Division
Comd	Command
JCO	Junior Commissioned Officer
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
DR	Dead reckoning

FG	Front guns
SOC	Struck off Charge
Recce	Reconnaissance
JBCU	Joint Bomber Conversion Unit
SU	Signal Unit
OTU	Officers Training Unit
ORR	Officers Rest Room
DASI	Director of Air Staff Inspections
EO	Engineer Officer

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

***Lieutenant Colonel Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinata Padak Awardee,
Bir Protik***



Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir is a recipient of the Swadhinata Padak, Bangladesh's highest award. He defected from the Pakistan Army in 1971 and joined the Mukti Bahini and fought in the Sylhet area. He was awarded the Bir Protik gallantry award for his services. He is a researcher and author on the Liberation War of 1971. He has authored several books, numerous articles in newspapers, and has made short films for various TV channels. In 2011, one of his films was awarded 'Best TV Documentary'. He serves as the Director of the Bangladesh Army History Project.

Brigadier Balraj Kapur



Brigadier Balraj Kapur joined 18 Rajput just before the 1971 War and took part in the Battle of Akhaura as a second lieutenant. He was wounded during the initial stages of the battle, but continued to participate in operations until the war ended. He went on to serve in counter-insurgency areas of Mizoram, Sri Lanka, and J&K. He has commanded the 20 Mechanised Battalion and 27 Armoured Brigade.

Colonel Kuldev Nand



Colonel Kuldev Nand joined the Army as a signalman in the Corps of Signals in February 1963. He took part in the 1965 War in the Barmer Sector and was thereafter selected through the ACC for a commission in the Regiment of Artillery in 1969. In the 1971 War he was a part of 23 Mountain Division. He did the Long Gunnery Staff Course in 1974-75, took part in Operation Pawan in Jaffna, and commanded 216 Medium Regiment (Bofors) in J&K. He is an golfer and a Services athlete.

Brigadier P.T. Ghogale, VSM



Brigadier Ghogale was commissioned into 8 Guards and participated in the Battle of Hilli in the 1971 War. He is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and the Naval War College. He commanded 18 Guards in North Sikkim and converted it to a mechanised profile, and thereafter commanded an armoured brigade. After he retired from the Army, he served as Director, Human Resources, Hyatt Group of hotels from 2004 to 2012.

Colonel A. Krishnaswami, VrC, VSM**



Colonel A. Krishnaswami was commissioned into the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles in December 1958. He took part in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pak Wars of 1965 and 1971. He was awarded a Vir Chakra for his performance as a company commander during the 1971 War and a Vishisht Seva Medal twice for distinguished performance as a Staff Officer.

Captain R.Y.S. Chauhan



Captain Chauhan was commissioned into 17 Kumaon. During the 1971 War, he commanded an infantry company with distinction during the battle of Bhaduria in the rank of second lieutenant. After retirement, he served as Deputy Director in Sainik Welfare Department, Government of U.P.

Colonel Shyam Singh



Colonel Shyam Singh was commissioned into 7 Rajputana Rifles on 30 June 1963. During the 1971 War, he took active part in the eastern sector as part of the liberating forces in Bangladesh. His role as company commander in the capture of Mynamati cantonment near Comilla on 9-10 December 1971 was most commendable. 7 Rajputana Rifles was awarded the Battle Honour, 'Mynamati' for this gallant action. Colonel Shyam Singh later commanded 8 Rajputana Rifles and retired on 1 August 1993.

Brigadier J.S. Makkar, VSM

Brigadier J.S. Makkar, an officer from the corps of Engineers, was awarded a Vishisht Seva Medal for distinguished service during the 1971 War. In addition to qualifying at the Defence Service Staff College, he also qualified at the Royal Military College of Science (U.K.). He was a member

of the Directing Staff, and the Head of Faculty at the College of Defence Management, and visiting faculty at various military and civil institutions.

Colonel Itbar Singh



Colonel Itbar Singh is a third generation army officer. He was commissioned into 2/5 Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) and took part in CI operations in Nagaland, and Congo, between 1960 and 1962. He earned a Mention in Despatches for his performance as a company commander in the battles of Pirganj and Bogra, in the 1971 War, and subsequently commanded his battalion. Two of his brothers, who served in the Air Force, won Vir Chakras during the war and the fourth brother trained the Mukti Bahini in that war. His son has also joined his regiment and is serving with 2/5 GR (FF) as a fourth generation officer of the Indian Army. Colonel Itbar's father and grandfather served in 59 Scinde Rifles and 6/13 Frontier Force, respectively as part of India's pre-independence Army.

Brigadier V.R. Swaminathan



Brigadier Swaminathan was the first Indian officer to be commissioned into 2 Hyderabad, which was later integrated into the Indian Army and was

designated as 22 Maratha Light Infantry (Hyderabad). He took part in the liberation of Goa and in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland. He commanded 22 Maratha LI during the 1971 War, an infantry brigade in Dhana (MP), a brigade in a counter-insurgency role in Mizoram and Bangalore sub area.

General Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM



General Deepak Kapoor was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1967, and saw action in the 1971 War as part of 23 Mountain Regiment and as GSO 3 in HQ 61 Mountain Brigade. He served as Chief Operations Officer of a UN Force in Somalia in 1994-95 and has commanded an infantry brigade at the Line of Control, an infantry division as part of a strike corps, a corps on the Sino-Indian border and has served as GOC-in-C Army Training Command and Northern Command, before taking over as COAS in September 2007.

Lieutenant Colonel Sunhara Singh, VrC



Lieutenant Colonel Sunhara Singh joined the Army in 1953, and was awarded the gold medal at the Officers Training Academy, Chennai. He was commissioned into the Kumaon regiment in 1953. He took part in the Sino-

Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pak Wars of 1965 and 1971. He was awarded the Vir Chakra for gallantry in the 1971 war and retired in 1988. After superannuation he established the Rising Star School in Karnal which has sent many students to the NDA. He has also started the War Heroes Memorial School which is growing rapidly.

Colonel S.V. Kotwal (AMC)



Colonel Kotwal was commissioned into the Army Medical Corps in January 1968 after completing his MBBS from Grant Medical College, Mumbai. He served with 11 Guards as their RMO during the 1971 War. Thereafter, he pursued post-graduate studies, earning an MS (General Surgery) and a MCh (Urology) degree. He retired prematurely to pursue medicine in the area of Urology, and is a recipient of several awards. He is interested in military history, photography and Indian wildlife. He considers his tenure as RMO with 11 Guards as a highpoint in his life.

Major General H.C. Sachdev, SM



Major General Sachdev was commissioned into the Maratha Light Infantry on 6 June 1954. He took part in the 1965 War and was wounded in action. He commanded 15 Maratha LI in the Burj Sector in the 1971 War and

successfully concluded operations with the capture of Burj, with a huge haul of Pakistani weapons, causing Pakistan's 43 Baluch to virtually collapse. He later commanded a strike division in a strike corps and ATNK &K Area.

Colonel S.S. Tomar



Colonel S.S. Tomar joined the Army during the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and was commissioned into 2 Assam. He is a veteran of the Indo-Pak Wars of 1965 and 1971. He has participated in counter-insurgency operations while on deputation with the Assam Rifles. He was specially selected for the capture of Ring Contour in the Uri Sector during the 1971 War, which was successfully accomplished.

Air Commodore Ashok P. Shinde, VrC, VM



Air Commodore Ashok P. Shinde participated in the 1965 and 1971 Wars, flying Sukhoi-7 fighter aircraft in photo-reconnaissance, interdiction, counter-air, and ground support missions. He was awarded a Vir Chakra for gallantry during the 1971 War. He trained Iraqi pilots converting to Sukhoi-7 aircraft, and for combat missions. He was also part of a team which planned and executed operations in the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Air Commodore Manbir Singh, VrC, VM



Air Commodore Manbir Singh was a fighter pilot who flew 27 missions during the 1971 War. He was awarded a Vir Chakra for his services in that war. He was also awarded a Vayu Sena Medal for landing a Mig-21 after its windshield was shattered by a vulture. He trained Iraqi pilots during the Iraq-Iran war of 1981, and retired in 1994.

Wing Commander W.H. Marshall, VM



Wing Commander W.H. Marshall was commissioned into the Air Force as a fighter pilot in 1953 and flew Spitfires, Tempests, and Vampires. He was appointed as an instructor at both flying academies. He subsequently flew Canberras on night bombing missions in the 1965 War and low level night interdiction attacking Pakistani supply routes, and was awarded the Vayu Sena Medal for gallantry. He continues to work as an aviation consultant in the corporate sector.

Wing Commander A. Raghunath, VrC



Wing Commander Raghunath was commissioned into the Indian Air Force as a navigator in 1964. He participated in the 1971 war as part of the Cobra squadron, where he undertook bombing missions on both the Eastern and Western Fronts. He was awarded a Vir Chakra for missions over East Pakistan, and retired in 1986. After retirement he worked with the Kirloskar Group of companies.

Wing Commander K.S. Chandrashekar, VM



Wing Commander Chandrashekar was commissioned into the Indian Air Force as a transport pilot, and later converted to Canberras. He took part in the Congo operations as part of the UN peacekeeping force. He saw active service in the 1965 and 1971 Wars. After retiring from the Air Force he was inducted into Air India in 1976 as a Boeing 747 Commander and flight instructor. He still continues to train Air India pilots on simulators.

Rear Admiral S. Ramsagar, AVSM, VrC, NM

Rear Admiral S. Ramsagar was commissioned into Indian Navy in 1959. A naval aviator, he was an Alize pilot, and took part in the 1965 War along with the Indian Air Force. In 1971, he participated in operations in the

Eastern sector from *INS Vikrant* and was awarded the Vir Chakra for his contribution. He commanded *INS Karwar*, *INS Vindhyagiri* and Air Squadrons 550 & 551, during his illustrious carrier. Also a recipient of Ati Vishisht Seva Medal and Nau Sena Medal, he retired as Military Secretary to the President of India in 1992.

Commodore K.P. Mathew, AVSM



Commodore Mathew was commissioned into the Indian Navy in 1968. He commanded a requisitioned trawler during the 1971 War besides being the skipper of *INS Cannanore*, *INS Beas*, *INS Vidhyagiri* and shore establishments, *INS Trata* and *INS Mandovi*. After retiring from the Navy he served with the Merchant Marine.