

# Eagle Unleashed

## IAF Strategy and Operations

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*The only unfettered use of air power in India's wars was in 1971, and it produced disproportionate and decisive outcomes. IAF's air strategy, the extent of its role in contributing to the failure of Pakistan's strategy in the west, and the vast range of operations carried out towards the surface war on both fronts simultaneously, are relatively unknown. A closer scrutiny of the IAF operations reveals its innovative air strategy, the high value strategic targeting which enabled strategic outcomes at the national level, offensive targeting which shaped the battlefields and extensive joint operations, towards national objectives.*

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In a surface-centric continental security-dominant military environment, the history of India's air power usage has been restrained and inadequate. In all the wars that India has fought after independence (1947–48, 1962, 1965 and 1999), there has been inadequate leveraging of air power. The strategic options provided by the unfettered use of air power have neither been fully understood nor exploited in the Indian context, except for a short duration of two weeks in the 1971 war. Consequently, the extent of the role of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the outcomes it produced in India's most significant war remain largely unknown to the nation, other than a passing mention of its actions in Longewala, Tangail or Dacca.

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Any analysis of air power must take into account that it is the only war where the IAF did not operate under any political constraints, its full potential was utilised and that it was fought on two fronts, each with its own peculiarities and challenges.

The important outcomes created by the unfettered employment of offensive air power were lost in the euphoria of victory and Bangladesh's independence. The success of the air campaign on both fronts was due to the strategic vision of Air Chief Marshal Pratap Chandra Lal. Having been the Vice Chief of Air Staff during the 1965 conflict, on taking over reins of the IAF, he swiftly implemented all important lessons of the previous war. Thus, the IAF was not only at its peak of operational readiness and training status but, most importantly, it also had an air strategy in place, which coincided with national and military strategies.

#### THE PRELUDE

A five-year plan was made by the Ministry of Defence for the expansion of 45 Squadron IAF in 1964, in which the older fleet of Vampire, Mystere and Toofani aircraft were to be replaced with modern fighters, bombers, reconnaissance and transport aircraft, helicopters and better weapons. However, the 1965 war, and subsequent fiscal constraints, slowed down the expansion, but '[f]ortunately, by 1971, their efficiency and strength had increased just enough to meet the challenge.'<sup>1</sup> As the possibility of war increased, the IAF reorganised itself, setting up Air Defence Control Centres for air defence (AD) in each of its commands, as well as Maritime Air Centres (MACs) at Bombay, Cochin and Vishakhapatnam for maritime air operations, providing cover to the navy on strike missions and protecting the coasts and merchant shipping.<sup>2</sup>

A resolute political leadership set unambiguous and decisive national aims and objectives, delegated responsibilities and thereafter, left the military to get on with their job. As recorded by Lal:

The Chiefs were kept in constant touch with the developments in the subcontinent and what the Cabinet was thinking about them. There was full and free exchange of ideas amongst the Chiefs. The period of waiting and watching from 26 March to 3 December was well spent during which the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the inter-service Committees, the Service Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence worked in a smooth and coordinated manner.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the synergy and cooperation amongst the national and military leadership enabled an achievable two-front strategy.

Pakistan's military strategy was based on the premise that defence of East Pakistan lay in West Pakistan. As a result, it kept the bulk of its air force assets and military, including its strike forces, in the west, underscoring the fact that Pakistan's real power centre lay in the west. Since it could not resolve the uprising in its east wing politically, it chose to force military action, thereby dragging India into the war. Pakistan believed that this would not only give it another opportunity to possibly wrest Kashmir, but in case East Pakistan seceded and managed to gain independence, it could be conveniently blamed on India. From the Indian perspective, a war in the east would inevitably force Pakistan to open the front in the west for several reasons: (i) to defend its rather flawed 'defence of East Pakistan lay in West Pakistan' strategy; (ii) to project India as the aggressor in the east, thus creating the perception internationally that it was compelled to open the western front; and (iii) to apply military pressure in the west to slow down India in the east till the United States (US) and China, post their historic rapprochement, came to its rescue.

Broadly, India's two-front strategy was aimed at defeating the enemy, gaining as much ground as possible and establishing a base for the creation of Bangladesh in the east, while keeping the Pakistanis at bay in the west. This was based on two key pragmatic assessments: a limited window of operations in the east, where even a war of two to three weeks could be foreclosed with international intervention; and any territorial gain in the west would have to be handed back once the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and international pressure came to be applied post-conflict.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, with the deterioration of the situation, the military objectives were laid down clearly:

1. To assist the Mukti Bahini in liberating a part of East Pakistan, where the refugees could be repatriated to live under their own Bangla government.
2. To prevent Pakistan from capturing any Indian territory of consequence in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan or Gujarat. This was to be achieved by offensive defence and not merely passive line holding.
3. To defend the integrity of India in case of a Chinese attack in the north.

### IAF's AIR STRATEGY

Based on the above-mentioned military objectives, under Lal's leadership, the IAF worked out its broad 'air strategy' for both fronts of operations:

1. Defence of the home base(s).
2. Assist the army in the field and to do it, gain and maintain favourable air situation (FAS) over tactical areas. Mount reconnaissance, interdiction and other operations having a direct bearing on the outcome of the land battle.
3. Conduct counter air operations (CAO), that is, reduce the effectiveness of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) by destroying its aircraft and bases.
4. Provide air transport support to own surface forces, mainly the Indian Army (IA).
5. Provide maritime support to the Indian Navy (IN).<sup>5</sup>

This was further expanded into separate front-specific air strategies. For the eastern front, it was:<sup>6</sup>

1. Eliminate the PAF at the earliest. Given the preponderance of army's offensive in an obstacle-bound riverine terrain and the limited window of operations, time was of essence. Elimination of enemy air attack, which could severely impact IA's progress, was therefore an imperative.
2. Render maximum assistance to the army in the form of offensive air support, transport and helicopter support and airborne operations. Again, the terrain dictated that speed and rapid mobility was critical to the IA, which would need extensive transport and helicopter operations. Offensive air support would enable interdiction of vital enemy military assets and lines of communications. Finally, to provide dedicated close air support (CAS) to the IA.
3. Assist the navy to isolate East Pakistan from West Pakistan, and prevent PAF's interference with operations of naval ships and air assets. This, once again, underscored the need for air superiority as, without it, the IN's aircraft carrier and aircraft would not be able to operate in the region.
4. Ensure AD of the area of responsibility (AOR) and the steel towns of Bihar and Orissa, which were lucrative strategic targets for the PAF.

While the eastern front was the key time-bound priority, it was clear that given Pakistan's strategy, it would definitely attack on India's western front. The three-pronged air strategy for the west was:<sup>7</sup>

1. Defence of the IAF home base(s). This obviously flowed from the lessons of the previous war where a large number of aircraft were lost on ground due to PAF air strikes.
2. Assist the army and navy, including gaining and maintaining FAS over tactical areas. This flowed from the challenges of disjointed and independent operations by the army and the IAF in 1965, and hence an FAS to enable greater freedom of own surface operations was clearly laid down as an operational priority. Given the strength of the PAF in the west, air superiority was not an option due to two facts. First, the combat aircraft force ratio of 1.4:1, though in IAF's favour, was inadequate due to: the wide frontage of operations; wide range of air operations to be undertaken; commitment of forces to the east due to the two-front nature of the war; and the ever-present Chinese threat. Second, due to limited IA objectives on the western front, coupled within the limited window of two weeks, FAS was the only viable option.
3. The next priority was CAO against enemy air bases and radar stations, including attacks on strategic targets which had a vital role in supporting the economy and war potential of the enemy. The inclusion of strategic air strikes against Pakistan's economic and war-waging centres of gravity (CoGs) was a first for the IAF.

The prioritised strategy was to be achieved by adopting an approach which, in the modern-day context of air warfare, is called a concept of operations (CONOPS). The offensive CONOPS that evolved in Lal's words – 'through a process of discussions amongst joint planners and Chiefs of Staff and senior AF Commanders', was the 'target system' strategy. All the important enemy targets were clubbed under three target systems. The first system to be targeted was the enemy air, through aggressive offensive operations against its air defences while guarding own airspaces. This was to wrest the control of air in India's favour so as to prevent the PAF from interfering with India's surface operations. The second was targeting the most important strategic CoGs of the enemy so as to not only cripple its war-fighting capability but also its capacity over a longer time frame. This involved targeting all forms of energy, which

included fuel storage tanks, oil refineries, gas plants, hydroelectric power plants, power stations, etc. Enemy transportation was the third system identified, which meant targeting key road and rail communication networks and choke points which linked Pakistan's hinterland to the Karachi Port, enabling the movement of goods, supplies, logistics and manpower.<sup>8</sup> It is through the perspective of IAF's strategy and CONOPS that its performance in the war must be analysed.

#### ROLLOUT OF THE AIR STRATEGY (EAST)

The two-front strategy forced the IAF to rebalance its combat resources on both fronts in order to overwhelm the PAF for achieving swift air superiority in the east, while maintaining a credible and favourable ratio of combat squadrons for a holding/limited offensive war in the west. On the east, the IAF initially deployed four squadrons for AD and six squadrons for strike roles, comprising of a total of 161 fighter aircraft, five helicopter squadrons and seven transport squadrons. The PAF had one squadron of Sabres, with 16 aircraft, and an assortment of trainer, helicopter and transport aircraft. While the 10:1 ratio may seem like an overkill, there were several factors that had to be taken into consideration, such as: India's aim of supporting the Mukti Bahini in the formation of Bangladesh; the PAF's grounding of all Bengali pilots in March 1971, coinciding with the military crackdown in the east;<sup>9</sup> and the removal of Air Commodore (Cmde) Z. Masud, the PAF Air Officer Commanding (AOC) in the east, due to his refusal to use the PAF against its own people; he was replaced by Air Cmde Inam-ul-Haq in March 1971.<sup>10</sup>

According to the history of the PAF, air operations in the east had begun in March with 14 Squadron, with the transport element playing a lead role in round-the-clock sorties to flush out the rebels.<sup>11</sup> This meant AD against the PAF which had started to regularly enter Indian airspace on such missions, and subsequently led to the shooting down of PAF Sabres over Boyra. In the event of a war in the east, the IAF's key objectives of air superiority against the PAF and support to the army would need adequate strike squadrons. The final factor was countering the ever-present threat from China, which had made clear to the US that in case of an Indo-Pak conflict, it would militarily intervene on behalf of Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> This meant that India, at all times, would have to cater for the China contingency.

### **Air Superiority and Outcomes**

The pre-emptive strike by the PAF in the west, on 3 December 1971, triggered the war. The IAF carried out strikes against airfields at Kurmitola, Tejgaon and Chittagong on the night of 3–4 and 4–5 December with the Canberras; and during the day, strikes were carried out with Hunters and Su-7s. Though the airfields were hit, they were not put out of action because of incorrect choice of weapons and initial enemy air opposition. The goal was to deny the use of these airfields, thereby taking the PAF out of the fight. This was vital as air superiority would enable full freedom of air operations, keep the surface operations free from enemy air interference and allow wholehearted assistance to the advancing IA. The initial limited success in neutralising the PAF airfields was because air-to-ground rockets proved ineffective in causing the desired level of damage on the runway surface. This led to eight MiG-21s being employed innovatively in airfield strikes, armed with 500 kilogram (kg) bombs delivered in steep dive attacks. The persistent attacks and exceptional results achieved in cratering the runways ensured they were no longer usable by the PAF, and their pilots were flown out to West Pakistan through Burma on 8–9 December. Post-war inspection revealed bomb craters of 46 direct hits on Tejgaon and 20 on Kurmitola runways.

Effectively from 6 December, the IAF had gained total air domination over the skies of East Pakistan,<sup>13</sup> enabling it to fly 2,002 sorties and restricting the PAF to only 30 sorties.<sup>14</sup> This automatically increased the availability of aircraft and air effort for close support and interdiction missions. It also enabled airborne operations and special heliborne operations in direct support of the army, which were to play a decisive role in the victory. The air superiority allowed the relatively slower Sea Hawk fighters to operate from the aircraft carrier, *INS Vikrant*, and carry out attacks in the coastal areas and facilities without enemy air interference. Another contribution from the morale point of view was the formation of the fledgling Mukti Bahini Air Force called 'Kilo Flight' in October 1971, where an assortment of nine defected Bengali PAF and civilian pilots were given training by Indian pilots. The IAF donated a Dakota, a DHC-3 Otter and an Alouette III aircraft, all of which were modified with weapons to form the Flight, which operated from Dimapur. The IAF leadership, aware of the immense significance, allowed Kilo Flight the symbolic privilege of opening the air war over East Pakistan by ensuring the Bengali pilots took the first shot.<sup>15</sup>

### Joint Operations

The lessons learnt from challenges faced in providing CAS to the army in the previous war led to several initiatives: coincidence of the AORs of the IA and IAF commands; establishment of the Advance Headquarters (HQs) alongside the respective IA commands; and the creation of Tactical Air Centres at the corps level to enable decentralised vetting and prioritisation of close support requirements. These initiatives, coupled with improved communication and tactical procedures, enabled the forward air controllers (FACs), who operated jointly at the brigade levels, to access the air effort more efficiently, and also reduced the mission response timelines.<sup>16</sup> Extensive training and exercises of the FACs, ground liaison officers of the army at the IAF bases and the joint operations staff in the west and east, in the preceding months, paid immense dividends in the conduct of CAS missions. Most importantly, these initiatives led to much greater mutual trust and confidence at all levels between the two services, ensuring more efficient use of air effort and reduction in wastages, unlike the previous war. Some wastages did occur in 1971 as well, but such confusion is inevitable in the fog of war as the field commander 'tends to call on every available resource to fight his battle'.<sup>17</sup>

The complete command of air in the east, which was achieved in 36 hours, allowed re-tasking of the MiG-21s and Gnats from AD and CAO roles to CAS role in support of the army. The IAF actively supported the IA in all corps sectors, preceding all thrusts. The thorough disruption in enemy rail and road communications had made the enemy totally dependent on the waterways for movement of troops, ammunition and supplies.<sup>18</sup> By 8 December, AD missions had stopped, with a corresponding increase in the effort towards surface operations. Over two-thirds of IAF offensive missions were in direct assistance of the army's land battle. Concentrated air attacks within one day destroyed almost all gunboats and steamers<sup>19</sup> on the rivers used by the enemy, denying it the flexibility and mobility it had enjoyed in the riverine obstacle-intensive terrain. Interdiction missions by Gnats, Hunters and Canberras carried out aggressive attacks on all water vessels, sparing only local boats, unless found to be carrying troops. S.N. Prasad notes: 'the attacks were carried out so thoroughly that thereafter few gunboats or steamers were seen plying in the Bangladesh rivers.'<sup>20</sup> Over and above the interdiction targets, the ammunition factory at Joydebpur, which supplied the Pakistani Army, was struck several times till it was destroyed.<sup>21</sup>



### **Air Power Effects**

The signal message of 9 December from Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) A.A.K. Niazi to President Yahya, admitting for the first time the criticality of the situation, is illustrative of the effects of IAF missions. Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) Siddiq Salik, who was the Public Relations Officer of the Pakistan Army, records:

ONE: REGROUPING READJUSTMENT IS NOT POSSIBLE DUE TO ENEMY MASTERY OF SKIES. POPULATION GETTING EXTREMELY HOSTILE AND PROVIDING ALL OUT HELP TO THE ENEMY. NO MOVE POSSIBLE DURING NIGHT DUE INTENSIVE REBEL AMBUSHES. REBELS GUIDING ENEMY THROUGH GAPS AND TO THE REAR. AIRFIELD DAMAGED EXTENSIVELY, NO MISSION LAST THREE DAYS, AND NOT POSSIBLE IN FUTURE. TWO: EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO HEAVY WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT DUE ENEMY AIR ACTION. TROOPS FIGHTING EXTREMELY WELL BUT STRESS AND STRAIN NOW TELLING HARD. NOT SLEPT FOR LAST 20 DAYS. ARE UNDER CONSTANT FIRE AIR, ARTILLERY AND TANKS. THREE: SITUATION EXTREMELY CRITICAL. WE WILL GO ON FIGHTING AND DO OUR BEST. FOUR: REQUEST FOLLOWING IMMEDIATE STRIKE ALL ENEMY AIR BASES THIS THEATRE. IF POSSIBLE, SEND (SIC) REINFORCEMENTS AIRBORNE TROOPS FOR PROTECTION DACCA.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the war, the IAF had flown 1,353 sorties towards CAS missions, of which a lion's share of 507 sorties were towards supporting 4 Corps under Lt Gen Sagat Singh, whose aggressive and innovative offensive strike thrusts received a special mention by both K.V. Krishna Rao and Lal.<sup>23</sup> The commitment of the IAF towards supporting the army is underscored by the fact that of the 13 combat-related aircraft losses, nine fighters and five pilots were lost to anti-aircraft guns and ground fire. The air superiority in the east also enabled the rapid redeployment of a Hunter and Su-7 squadron to bolster the western front.

### **Combat Support Air Operations**

With large number of bridges and ferries destroyed, the rivers and innumerable rivulets presented a serious obstacle that slowed down the movement of advancing forces. Mi-4 helicopters were extensively used

for Heli-lift operations between 7–15 December, flying a total of 409 sorties, forward deploying 4,803 troops and 100,070 kg of weapons and equipment, by day and night. This rapid movement of troops and equipment across obstacles and rivers enabled leapfrogging and bypassing of the enemy to capture key objectives.<sup>24</sup> The first Heli-lift of a battalion from Kailashahar, across the Surma River, in full view of the Pakistani brigade at Sylhet, was a deception master plan by Lt Gen Sagat Singh. The noise and the continuous movement of helicopters ferrying the battalion created an impression of a large force being inducted, locking in the Pakistani forces who were expecting an attack.<sup>25</sup> In reality, the Indian forces were able to bypass the enemy who were ‘completely passive and paralysed. The capture of Sylhet was facilitated, because of this operation and the better part of the enemy division was bottled up there.’<sup>26</sup>

The second was an even more daring and innovative night Heli-lift of a battalion across the Meghna River in the darkness of 10–11 December to Baidya Bazaar: ‘Again, this operation had resulted in panic in the enemy ranks and early capture of Dacca.’<sup>27</sup> The IAF Mi-4s, operating ex-Agartala where they had to return periodically for refuelling, moved 650 troops using ‘80 hand-held battery powered torches of the kind normally used in any household’ to mark the helipads.<sup>28</sup> The IAF also carried out the casualty evacuation of 899 soldiers from forward areas by helicopters, and thereafter airlifted them to Guwahati/Calcutta by Dakotas, which contributed greatly to the morale of the troops.<sup>29</sup>

The total air superiority also allowed the iconic airborne paradrop operation over Tangail to be conducted on 11 December. The massive air operation, involving 23 Packet, 22 Dakota, six AN-12 and two Caribou aircraft, para-dropped 784 troops, weapons and equipment within a span of 50 minutes, without any losses. A resupply drop of 40 troops and 45 tonnes of equipment, by five AN-12 and one Packet aircraft, followed on 12 December.

### **Fall of Dacca**

The capture of Dacca, interestingly, was not a part of the army’s initial strategy. According to Lt Gen J.F.R. Jacob, on 13 December, Manekshaw ordered Eastern Command to capture all towns which had been bypassed while advancing into Bangladesh, and Dacca was not named in this list of towns.<sup>30</sup> Krishna Rao posits that while Dacca had to be kept constantly in view as the final objective, its final capture would depend on the progress of operations.<sup>31</sup> The dramatic advances made by the Indian forces, the

increasing international pressure, entry of the American aircraft carrier, *USS Enterprise*, into the Bay of Bengal as a coercive signal,<sup>32</sup> all seemed to indicate an imminent United Nations (UN)-called ceasefire.<sup>33</sup> An untimely ceasefire of all hostilities would have allowed a desperate and vital reprieve to Yahya and prevented the fall of East Pakistan. This was a critical factor which the military leadership had anticipated prior to the war, which necessitated rapid consolidation of the gains rather than the capture of Dacca.

Being the capital of East Pakistan, capture of Dacca was central to the creation of Bangladesh, but time seemed to be running out. A strategic window of opportunity opened up when the IAF wireless experimental unit at Eastern Command picked up an encrypted message, at 1045 hours (hrs), that a cabinet meeting was to be held at 1200 hrs on 14 December. The meeting was to be chaired by Dr A.M. Malik, Governor of East Pakistan, and attended by General (Gen) Tikka Khan, the Martial Law Administrator, and the PAF AOC, Major General (Maj Gen) Rao Farman Ali, among others. According to P.V.S. Jagan Mohan and Sameer Chopra:

Army Command and Eastern Air Command immediately grasped the importance of the communique. Malik and his cabinet had the capacity to take momentous decisions on the course of action: prolonging the war and shoring up the defence of Dacca. Or even arranging for a ceasefire rather than surrender. The meeting had to be disrupted, perhaps to remove the 'decision making capability'; a strike on the meeting would paralyse East Pakistani decision.<sup>34</sup>

The pilots were briefed about the target at 1055 hrs, with instructions to strike it by 1120 hrs, which included a flying time of 20 minutes. What followed is a classic example of strategic effects caused by the swift response, accuracy and lethality of air power. The target was reached using a locally obtained Burma Shell tourist map and six MiG-21s struck the governor's house in Dacca with 192 rockets, followed up by a 30 millimetre (mm) cannon attack by two Hunters. The effects of the air strike were observed first hand by John Kelly, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative, and a journalist, Gavin Young, who broadcast around the world on wire:

The jets made a shattering row. The ground crashed and heaved... Malik produced a shaking pen and a sheet of paper. The Ministers mumbled and held on together. Between one crash and the next

Kelly and I looked at the paper and saw that it was addressed to the President Yahya Khan and that Malik had at last resigned. That was the end to the Governor's House. That was the end of the last Government of East Pakistan.<sup>35</sup>

Amidst intense enemy air activity, Governor Malik informed the president about the futility of further operations and after mid-day rocket attack by six enemy fighters, he and his cabinet resigned. The grim reality of the situation in East Pakistan dawned on Yahya Khan and at 1332 hrs, he replied in a signal message: 'You should now take all necessary measures to stop the fighting and preserve the lives of all the armed forces personnel, all those from West Pakistan and all loyal elements.'<sup>36</sup> Lt Gen A.A.K. Niazi immediately met the US consul with a proposal for a ceasefire, and sent a copy to Yahya. The message was intercepted by Indians, who stepped up their air attacks to maintain the pressure, and eight 500 pound bombs were dropped on Niazi's command post in Dacca cantonment. The new site selected for the Pakistani Eastern Command in Dacca town was thus bombed even before the HQ started to shift.<sup>37</sup>

By 14 December, under relentless air attacks, Pakistani troops occupied Dacca University campus. After the IAF faced heavy small arms fire in the first air attack, on 15 December, the university was repeatedly struck by 40 sorties, which, according to Air Vice Marshal A.K. Tiwary, totally neutralised the Pakistanis. The intensity of IAF attacks is borne out by Air Cmde Inam-ul-Haq, the PAF AOC, according to whom the IAF activity over the Dacca complex was so intense that the stock of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) ammunition, which was to have lasted for months, was exhausted in a fortnight and only one day's ammunition was left on the day of the surrender.<sup>38</sup> As a day, 14 December was also unique as IAF Hunters made history by landing in the captured Jessore airfield.<sup>39</sup> As the end game neared, the air offensive was stepped up to support the army in the mopping up and against the final Pakistan resistance, rising from 91 sorties on 14 December to 152 on 15 December.

Finally, at 4.30 p.m. on 16 December, the Pakistan Army surrendered at Dacca race course, in the presence of an estimated one million people of the new country of Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, the greatest acknowledgement of the IAF's role came from the enemy. On being asked why he had surrendered, Niazi pointed to the wings on Group Captain Chandan Singh's chest and said:

This has hastened the surrender. I and my people have had no rest during day or night, thanks to your Air Force. We changed our quarters ever so often, trying to find a safe place for a little rest and sleep so that we could carry on the fight, but we have been unable to do that.<sup>41</sup>

#### ROLLOUT OF THE AIR STRATEGY (WEST)

The need for Pakistan to launch an offensive in the west to support its strategy is endorsed by Niazi, who wrote that the fate of not only the eastern garrison and East Pakistan but whole of Pakistan hung on the outcome of the offensive in the west.<sup>42</sup> Pakistan's aim was to secure significant territory in Jammu and Kashmir, which could be retained after the war, and launch a major armoured offensive across the front ranging from Jammu to Ganganagar. India's military strategy was therefore centred on safeguarding its own territory, where it would remain defensive initially, and if Pakistan were to initiate a war, then it would retaliate by going on the offensive to secure limited objectives. In fact, 'There was no question of any effort at dismembering West Pakistan, as mischievously propagated in certain quarters.'<sup>43</sup> In the northern sector on the western front, limited attacks had been planned to strengthen Indian defensive positions. A Pakistani thrust was expected in Poonch and to counter it, two thrusts were planned: one in the north between the Beas and Basantar rivers; and the second along the Ravi axis. In the southern sector, two Indian thrusts were planned in the Rajasthan sector: one in Barmer sector towards Chor; and other in south towards Rahimyar Khan.<sup>44</sup> The IN was actively involved in the strategy for conducting offensive operations against the Pakistan Navy centred around Karachi, after ensuring safety from the PAF in a joint IAF-IN operation in the area coinciding in time and space.<sup>45</sup>

In the west, the IAF had 24 fighter/fighter-bomber squadrons and four bomber squadrons deployed, which included two squadrons of legacy Mysteres, as well as Vampires, totalling 419 combat aircraft, while PAF had 13 fighter/bomber squadrons, totalling 288 aircraft. This translated into a force ratio of 1.45:1 in IAF's favour in the beginning of the war on 3 December, which increased to 1.6:1 after 8–9 December, when one squadron each of Hunter and MiG-21 was redeployed to the west.<sup>46</sup> However, including the F-86 Sabres, F-104 Starfighters and MiG-19, from Jordan, Iran, China<sup>47</sup> and Saudi Arabia,<sup>48</sup> which supplemented the PAF inventory by two additional squadron worth of fighters, as reported,

the actual combat ratio came down to 1.4:1. Although the IAF's priority of operations was AD, support to the army and navy and then CAO, for a better grasp of the impact of air power on joint operations, in the subsequent narrative sequence, AD and CAO have been combined, followed by support to the IA and maritime air operations.

### **AD and CAO**

Post-1965, the IAF bases were significantly bolstered by construction of additional forward airfields; and their AD improved with blast-protected concrete aircraft pens and infrastructure. There was an extensive medium and high-level radar coverage, which was integrated with radar-controlled guns and surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems and woven into the base Air Defence Centres of all fighter airfields.<sup>49</sup> The radar coverage was also strengthened by moving units from the east to fill critical gaps in the west. In some vital sectors, radars were inducted as a redundancy in key areas of operation. Important cities, economic installations and airfields were defended with a variety of AAA weapons and SAM systems. A Low-Level Reporting System (LLRS), consisting of a chain of mobile observation posts equipped with radio/telephone communication system, was set up and integrated into the AD network to fill low-level radar cover gap.<sup>50</sup> Maj Gen Fazal Muqueem Khan acknowledges that India had a balanced and integrated AD which was well-knit into formidable and deep defence zone. In addition, he gives credit to IAF's expansion and modernisation, as well as crystallised strategic options, contingencies, updated plans and all aspects of operational command and control.<sup>51</sup> The war in the west started with the 'pre-emptive' strike on 3 December, when the PAF struck Pathankot, Amritsar, Awantipur and Srinagar between 1740–1745 hrs, with only 18–26 aircraft, with the aim of diminishing the capability of IAF to operate from its forward airfields.<sup>52</sup> As per Prasad, six Starfighters and 10 Sabres were used in an attack which proved ineffectual,<sup>53</sup> underscoring the efficacy of IAF's passive AD measures and aircraft dispersion in blast pens, due to which no IAF aircraft was lost on ground, and neither claimed by the PAF.<sup>54</sup>

The CAO kicked in on the first day of war itself, when the IAF retaliated swiftly within two-and-half hours,<sup>55</sup> with 23 missions by night against seven major PAF airfields. To sustain the pressure, the attacks were continued through two nights by Canberras and fighters from the IAF's newly formed unit, Tactics and Combat Development and Training

Squadron (TCDTS) (renamed Tactics and Air Combat Development Establishment [TACDE] after its upgradation in 1972). Specially created in February 1971, this small unit evolved strike and combat tactics and carried out extensive weapon trials before the war, from May to July. Also, tactical seminars and exercises were held and tactical standard operating procedures (SOPs) were prepared for the IAF. The unit struck back repeatedly on the first night of the war, with its MiG-21s and Su-7s hitting seven airfields and counter air targets 180–200 kilometre (km) deep in enemy territory, at low levels, with no moonlight or navigational aids and marginal fuel reserves, delivering 500 kg bombs with great accuracy.<sup>56</sup> The use of MiG-21s and Su-7s in such circumstances was a first for the IAF, and possibly the world. Despite shortage of equipment, operating two types of aircraft and from temporary locations, the contribution of TCDTS was considerable,<sup>57</sup> flying 174 sorties by day and 119 by night.<sup>58</sup>

All told, the IAF's total counter air effort in the west added up to 423 sorties against PAF airfields and radars, where it lost 17 aircraft.<sup>59</sup> Of the total air effort, 141 sorties were flown on third night and fourth day. Of these, it is the daytime 118 CAO sorties which cost the loss of seven aircraft—four in air combat and three to AAA. However, according to Khan, 10 aircraft were lost in air combat and seven to AAA in the daylight raid, a claim which neither bears scrutiny nor finds a mention in the *History of the PAF* by Hussain and Qureshi. Still, there is no denying the high attrition rate of 6 per cent suffered in the daytime attacks over PAF airfields. Tiwary attributes this to several factors, ranging from single attack direction, multiple attack passes, set attack patterns, dive attacks in dense AAA zones over the target areas, to inadequate tactical routing through safe areas, vulnerability of low-level missions to ground fire and inadequate AD escorts in general, in the initial days. While the tactical aspects are definitely pertinent in hindsight, one cannot take away the courage and commitment of the pilots flying deep into enemy territory, often at the extremities of aircraft range, into heavily defended PAF bases. High combat losses in the opening rounds of war are a reality due to high-risk offensive counter air, vital for the control of the air. William Momyer explains: 'The most precious thing an air force can provide to an army or navy is air superiority, since this gives to surface the ability to carry out their own plan of action without interference from an enemy air force.'<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the losses must be seen in the perspective of strategic outcomes created by the IAF's CAO in the west.

Maj Gen D.L. Palit writes that, within 24 hours, the IAF had broken the back of the PAF,<sup>61</sup> which is said to have lost 50 aircraft on the western front as per official records.<sup>62</sup> Pushpindar Singh puts this loss at 51,<sup>63</sup> of which 23 PAF aircraft were lost on the ground. Palit claims 25 aircraft were lost on ground, which later assessments place at 30.<sup>64</sup> Whether it was 23 or 30 PAF aircraft that were lost on ground, the fact is that it wrote off between 8–10 per cent of its fighter fleet—a loss which impacted its strategy and combat performance. The IAF's planned strategy of FAS could not have been achieved without the CAO, where 15 enemy airfields were targeted. Of these, six were forward airfields without any PAF deployments, but were targeted nevertheless, to render them unavailable and deter their use to forward deploy fighters. This was critical as forward deployment would not only have allowed the PAF to challenge the FAS but also enabled greater support to Pakistan Army, which in turn would have directly impacted our land operations, both in the tactical battle area (TBA) and the maritime domain. The aggressive and persistent counter air targeting was due to a lesson well learnt from the past, where the restrictions imposed—preventing striking the PAF airfields—cost the IAF dearly.

### Effects of CAO

The outcomes of the CAO were:

1. The PAF relocated by falling back from three forward bases to depth bases in the north, and it was also denied the use of four forward bases in the Rajasthan sector. In addition, it relocated two squadrons for the south (Karachi).
2. It forced the PAF to adopt a defensive strategy concentrated on AD of depth air bases.
3. Operating from depth bases compelled PAF operations to shift to medium altitudes and fly high-low-high mission profiles, which could be picked up on radar and intercepted by the IAF.
4. The increased distance adversely impacted its offensive capacity due to reduced weapon carriage capability vis-à-vis fuel. It also reduced the support the PAF could provide to its army.
5. It significantly reduced the PAF interference in IA's surface operations.
6. It allowed IAF to focus on targeting the energy and transportation 'systems'.



The efficacy of the strategy is borne out by Khan:

The defensive strategy of the PAF in fact, gave the IAF a free hand to interdict Pakistan communications and other strategic targets and keep pressure on Pakistan troops in the forward areas. The situation as it emerged seemed that, while the PAF had complete air superiority over their bases, the IAF could operate without hindrance in the forward areas and over Pakistani vital communications along her borders.<sup>65</sup>

The PAF perspective that it achieved air superiority over its air bases is incorrect since IAF continued to carry out 282 sorties of CAO from 5 December to 17 December, including eight sorties on the last day of war. While FAS was the goal, effectively the IAF had gained air superiority over Pakistan's area of tactical operations, where its energy and transportation 'systems' were to be engaged. Niazi writes: 'Indian aircraft had command of the skies over West Pakistan as PAF was nowhere putting up effective resistance.'<sup>66</sup> This was also endorsed by Palit, according to whom the IAF had established air superiority in the western front by 4 December evening.<sup>67</sup>

### **In Assistance of the Army**

As per the official history records, out of 4,509 sorties flown in the west, 41.3 per cent were flown in direct assistance of the surface campaign, 45.9 per cent were towards AD, 8.9 per cent were towards CAO, 0.8 per cent were towards strategic strikes and 3.1 per cent were towards reconnaissance. Krishna Rao writes that given IAF's CAO and FAS strategy, CAS availability was limited and desired results were not obtained wherever Pakistan positions in defence were well concealed and camouflaged. However, when Pakistan armour and guns were in the open, like in the Sialkot and Longewala sectors, 'the Air Force dealt with the target very effectively.'<sup>68</sup> There are two aspects here. On the issue of limited air effort, the facts do not support his perception and this is explained in the subsequent paragraph. On the issue of efficacy of the IAF's ability to destroy camouflaged and dug-in targets being lesser than destroying targets in the open needs no clarification. This is a well-established problem which is common to all the services the world over, given the high speeds, firing ranges and limited cockpit visibilities of fighter aircraft.

The Pakistani ground operations began on 3–4 December night, preceded by the ineffective PAF counter air strike. The attack in Poonch

sector was beaten back by the Sikhs who fought valiantly. The IAF also carried out strafing of the enemy using the slow Harvard aircraft, which was effectively used in the narrow-wooded valleys and proved to be a morale booster for the IA.<sup>69</sup> The innovative exploitation of the AN-12 transport aircraft in the bombing role proved effective in Poonch sector. The AN-12s also bombed the enemy's Changa Manga ammunition depot in the forests for two days and attacked Pakistani artillery concentration around the Haji Pir pass successfully.<sup>70</sup> The bombing attacks over troop concentrations in Kahuta, called for by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in the forest north-west of Poonch, forced the enemy to call off the attack; and the targeting of forward assembly areas on 9–10 December caused the second enemy offensive to fizzle out.<sup>71</sup> The 40 tonnes of bombs dropped over the enemy by night, where the flashes of the enemy guns revealed their positions, leading to their neutralisation, was confirmed by Lt Gen Candeth to Lal.<sup>72</sup> In the battle for Chamb, the attempted Pakistan armoured thrust led to the enemy losing 23 tanks, with the majority of the kills by IAF aircraft.<sup>73</sup> Khan records that Indian artillery fire and heavy air activity led to heavy casualties and the bridgehead being withdrawn.<sup>74</sup> Hunters and Su-7s carried out extensive close support sorties, and the Canberra's bombing at night helped stabilise the position.<sup>75</sup>

The IAF chief, closely monitoring the slow offensive operations in the Shakargarh bulge, was concerned if the IAF effort was adequate. He was assured by Candeth that the slow progress was not due to lack of IAF effort, but the extremely cautious approach of the corps commander. Air effort towards assisting surface operations was in plenty but could not be utilised due to non-availability of worthwhile targets.<sup>76</sup> It was also used in a wasteful manner against targets that could have been better engaged by the surface forces themselves.<sup>77</sup> In the Punjab sector, at Hussainiwala, the enemy attacked the IA position across the river and cut off the defending Punjab Regiment. Over two dozen sorties of 'timely and extremely effective air strikes' by Su-7s, which kept the Pakistan armour at bay,<sup>78</sup> helped to cover the withdrawal of the beleaguered unit,<sup>79</sup> a fact which even Khan records: 'as many as six IAF air strikes to keep up the pressure'.<sup>80</sup>

The fairly serious reversal in Fazilka sector saw extensive engagement by IAF Mysteres,<sup>81</sup> which, despite taking heavy losses, prevented a breakthrough by Pakistan armour.<sup>82</sup> Further south in the Rajasthan sector, the Pakistan Army launched a massive offensive planned by their chief,

hoping to capture Jaisalmer airfield. On 5 December, at Longewala, IAF Hunters responded to calls for CAS by the divisional commander and carried out 17 sorties against the enemy armour which had beleaguered a company of 23 Punjab Regiment. On the first day itself, 15 tanks and one armoured recce vehicle were destroyed, and 23 were damaged, thus immobilising them. The 12 Infantry Division recorded the famous SOS message (translated) sent by the Pakistan forces under attack:

The enemy air force has made our life miserable. Each aircraft goes and another comes and dances above us for up to twenty minutes each. Forty of our equipment have been destroyed. Let alone advance further, even retreat has become difficult. Provide air support immediately, otherwise retreat will be impossible.<sup>83</sup>

In the words of the legendary Ian Cardozo: 'By the evening of 6 December, nearly thirty-seven tanks lay burning/damaged in this belt of the Thar Desert. The battle of Longewala was, in fact over.'<sup>84</sup>

According to Khan, 'The enemy was the master of the skies.'<sup>85</sup> The IAF efforts towards CAS and assistance to the army was continuous and carried on till the last day of the war. Indeed, it provided extensive assistance to army's offensive; was instrumental in precluding major Pakistan offensives in Suleimanke, Fazilka and Longewala; and provided critical support in defensive battles, especially wherever the IA was beleaguered. An important aspect which needs to be remembered whenever there is a debate on the large ratio of AD sorties is that a huge portion of the AD combat air patrol was over the TBA, providing cover over both offensive and defensive battles of the army. This was pivotal in preventing PAF interference, ensuring FAS, and thus enabling extensive CAS by the IAF. The PAF claimed 922 missions in direct support of the Pakistan Army.<sup>86</sup> However, according to Indian official records, 'this must be considered a gross exaggeration' and best estimates put it around 500.<sup>87</sup> Compared to this, the 1,862 sorties of CAS to the IA clearly indicates the quantum of air effort which was possible due to the FAS. Of the total 50 fighter losses, 20 were lost during counter air for establishing FAS and the balance were lost to small arms/enemy AAA; and there was no loss to enemy air while providing close support. Also, the PAF could launch only 10–15 sorties per day in support of its army from 6 December onwards.<sup>88</sup> Given the scale of the operations and the frontage, this amounted to negligible enemy air interference to the IA operations.

### An Innovative CONOPS at Work

The 'target system' CONOPS of the IAF also paid significant dividends. The first 'energy system' target attack was on 4 December on oil tanks at Keamari, Karachi, by Hunters from Jamnagar. In this attack, two tanks were set on fire, which burned for four days, as recorded in the history of Pakistan Navy. The mission was launched due to the initiative of the squadron commander of the operational training unit (OTU), who was keen to use the latest Mk 56 Hunters with 235 gallon drop tanks against Karachi. The chief operations officer of Jamnagar, busy with strike planning of other targets, cleared him. After landing back from the successful attack, the OTU was redeployed immediately to Jaisalmer and the Karachi oil tank strike outcome was not officially recorded.<sup>89</sup> According to *The New York Times* of 5 December 1971:

Raids on Karachi Reported Meanwhile, Indian bombers were said to have attacked targets in Karachi, and air raid sirens wailed in Rawalpindi and other West Pakistani cities. There were five raids on Karachi on Saturday, The Associated Press reported, and civil defense source there said one Indian plane had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire.

The reported loss of a plane was incorrect but nevertheless, it endorses that the air strike did take place. This strike was incorrectly attributed to the Indian Navy, which successfully engaged the Karachi oil complex only on its second strike, which took place on 8 December.<sup>90</sup> The IAF attacked oil storage tanks in Drigh Road, Attock refinery and the Sui gas plant, along with its storage facilities. Mangla Dam, Suleimanke Headworks and power stations were also targeted.

The 'transportation systems' too were targeted extensively and were included in the interdiction campaign against the Pakistan Army. These included strikes on Karachi harbour, road-railway links of Sindh-Punjab, Hyderabad-Gadra Road, Jhelum-Wazirabad, Montgomery-Pattoki, Rati-Khanpur reti, Bahawalpur, Vihari, etc. Rail junctions and yards of Lahore, Okara, Raiwind, Lodhran, Larkana, Zafarwal, Narowal, Jassar, Ghotki, Larkana, Khairpur, Khudian, Wazirabad, etc., were all targeted by fighter and bomber strikes. On 15 December, Western Air Command continued interdiction of the whole transportation system between Sialkot and Sukkur, reducing Pakistan road and rail traffic to a trickle.<sup>91</sup> In the west, 50 trains, 20 locomotives and about 400 wagons were destroyed.<sup>92</sup> Several permanent and temporary boat bridges were

regularly targeted. The extent and persistence of IAF's air superiority over the operational areas allowed it to operate without hindrance in forward areas, including over Pakistani vital communications along the entire border. Pakistan was ill prepared to meet the Indian interdiction onslaught due to the sudden change in IAF strategy from destroying the 'enemy air' system to destroying lines of communication and industrial targets.<sup>93</sup> Another understated success was its pre-planned AD radar deployment, which was effective in keeping IAF fighters over the TBA clear of enemy combat air patrol aircraft.<sup>94</sup>

While Pakistan may have perceived the shift from a PAF-centric CAO-intensive operations to a deliberate surface support and offensive targeting as a change of strategy, the fact is that it was a pre-planned, integrated and a concurrently run CONOPS. The target system strategy was undeniably successful and as Prasad posits: 'the strategic bombing drove home the fury of the war of the war to the people of Pakistan'. The Karachi attack destroyed millions of gallons of fuel; the Attock refinery was set on fire producing no dividends from 1971–72; and the cooling tower of the Sui gas plant was damaged, reducing the production to 50 per cent till April 1972.<sup>95</sup> Strategic effects were evident as 'Pakistani fuel reserves were considerably reduced',<sup>96</sup> which impacted their war effort both in terms of supply and distribution, and had to be imported from Iran.<sup>97</sup> Prasad summarises:

Though only a small percentage of IAF's offensive effort was directed towards strategic/economic targets the results outweighed the efforts. Pakistan lost a large chunk of her fuel resources during the conflict and there was a considerable reduction in her power generation also. A longer war, in all probability, would have meant a disaster for Pakistan.<sup>98</sup>

The significant aspect is that the IAF flew a total of 11,549 sorties in 14 days,<sup>99</sup> of which 6,604 were combat sorties, with an average aircraft utilisation rate of 40 per cent (as against an initial planned rate of 75 per cent, reducing to 70 per cent after five days and then to 60 per cent of the available strength),<sup>100</sup> assessed on the basis of both fronts put together. This means that the IAF had spare capacity to fight if the PAF had been more aggressive, or if the war were to last longer. It also underscores the efficacy of IAF's operational planning, force utilisation and combat persistence while fighting against trained and capable opposition.

### Combat Support Operations

Strategic photo reconnaissance was carried out by Canberras and tactical photo recce capacity was built up by modifying Hunters, Sukhois and MiGs, which was also called fighter reconnaissance (FR). These were used for both tactical recce for the army and bomb damage assessment (BDA) after air strikes. Post-mission photo development, analysis and dissemination from joint perspective emerged as an area needing attention,<sup>101</sup> as also brought out by Candeth<sup>102</sup> and Krishna Rao.<sup>103</sup> Electronic warfare employment was very nascent and used in a limited manner for communication jamming. Transport aircraft and helicopters performed a huge and unsung role, airlifting thousands of personnel and tonnes of wartime loads, ammunition and equipment on both fronts. In the east, the IAF created history with Heli-bridging and airborne drop. In the west too, a drop was catered for but not executed. These enabled IAF units to move swiftly between bases, and also shift fronts. The AN-12s were innovatively used for bombing missions with significant results. Caribou and Otter aircraft played a vital role in supporting operations in the short airstrips in the North-East. Transport aircraft were also used as radio relays for deep strikes into enemy territory by night. Helicopters were extensively exploited in the east in support of land operations. Army's requirement of transport support to airlift two brigades from the east to the west was met. While helicopters took on field-level casualty evacuation, over 800 casualties were flown by transport aircraft to hospitals in the rear areas.<sup>104</sup>

### Maritime Air Operations

A smaller and yet notable part of the IAF support to the surface forces was towards maritime operations. The IAF had a maritime organisation in place on both seaboard in the form of MACs, under AOC Maritime Air Operations in Bombay. Lal writes that 13–14 aircraft were allotted to each MAC and 545 hrs of air effort were flown in nearly a hundred missions since mid-October, prior to the war. The maritime reconnaissance (MR) role was undertaken by a squadron of Super Constellation aircraft and strike role by a squadron of Canberras. Since the naval plans were not defined, air power requirements were not clear. The operations in the east was centred around *INS Vikrant*, which was free to come into operations with the sinking of the Pakistani submarine, *PNS Ghazi*, off Vishakhapatnam. The air superiority enabled full freedom of naval operations and enabled *INS Vikrant* to play an active

offensive role, with its Belize and Sea Hawk aircraft striking port facilities, naval infrastructure and Pakistani merchant shipping in and around Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. It also assisted in contraband control and apprehension of merchant shipping and enabled amphibious landing.<sup>105</sup>

On the west front, the withdrawal of Pakistan Navy into Karachi harbour and limited submarine operations allowed the IN to dominate the Arabian Sea. The IAF's offensive strikes to support the navy were conducted over Masroor airfield and Karachi between 3–5 December and paralysed the PAF AD system.<sup>106</sup> This enabled the navy's abortive missile boat strike on 5 December to go through without any PAF response, with combat air patrol by Hunter aircraft providing cover to the post-strike exit of the missile boats. The continued attacks by Canberra's over Masroor and Drigh Road caused considerable damage and contributed in keeping the PAF at bay, thus enabling the second missile boat strike by the navy on 8 December night to go through successfully without air interference. The IAF MR aircraft carried out regular missions for shipping, including searches for *INS Khukri* which was sunk by a Pakistani submarine. A total of 96 sorties were flown by the IAF in support of the navy in the west.<sup>107</sup>

#### THE FINAL ANALYSIS

By all standards, it was a unique war, fought simultaneously on two widely separated fronts. Two nations went to war and three emerged. India defeated Pakistan decisively in the east and captured approximately 93,000 prisoners of war. Also, it was in a dominant position in the west militarily, with Pakistan's offensive having failed. According to official history, Pakistan was in no position to continue the fight on account of: a politically unstable internal situation; oil and ammunition stocks being reduced to two weeks by the IAF; no replenishments possible due to the IN's blockade; and the IA being in a better position territorially.<sup>108</sup> Further, despite all promises, neither China nor the US did anything tangible to rush to the aid of their protégé. However, Muslim nations extended their support to Pakistan, and also provided military assistance. For that matter, India too did not receive any direct support, except aid and international sympathy for the refugee crisis. The Soviet Union emerged as a significant friend and this was to shape the future Indo-Soviet relations and regional geopolitics. Given the circumstances, there was definitely a section of Indians who believed that the war in the west should have been continued till Pakistan was decisively defeated.

Whether this would have ended the challenges of the Indo-Pak issues is debatable, but India chose to end the war on its terms.

The IAF air strategy and CONOPS proved successful. It achieved total air supremacy in the east. On the west, while the goal was FAS, it actually managed to gain air superiority in the forward TBAs and in-depth up to the north–south vital communication network. This played an overarching role in enabling total freedom for both the army and the navy from enemy air opposition and interference in the conduct of their operations in the east. On the western front too, the PAF was neither able to support the Pakistani Army adequately nor was it able to cause any significant attrition or interference in IA's ground campaign. In the east, the IAF was able to cause a serious mobility paralysis for the Pakistan Army by taking out the rail and waterway transportation system.

The IAF interdiction and CAS not only caused significant attrition to the enemy military but also severely affected their morale. The fall of Dacca was certainly swifter due to the relentless air strikes on enemy positions, which actually impacted their will to fight. Without air power, Dacca could easily have become a long-drawn battle of house-to-house fighting, like the Battle for Stalingrad in World War II. As per Niazi's four-layered defence of Dacca fortress plan, the final battle was to be fought in the built-up areas,<sup>109</sup> which would have not only been militarily debilitating but also a time-consuming battle. This delay would have enabled strategic space to Pakistan to force a ceasefire through international intervention and would have denied India the ascendancy of a decisive surrender. The attack on the governor's house amidst relentless air strikes on Dacca was therefore justifiably the strategic tipping point for the final surrender. The IAF's extensive role supported the other services and, on occasions, even played a pivotal part in both offensive and defensive battles. The Meghna River crossings, the Tangail paradrop and the thwarting of three major enemy armoured thrusts at Chamb, Fazilka and Longewala remain examples of classic air power effects.

The first unfettered offensive employment of air power in war by India actually enabled a swift decisive outcome in a limited and high-intensity campaign. If the IAF had been constrained like it was in the previous war, it is debatable if the war could have been won so swiftly, with such extensive enemy attrition and significantly lower own losses. Niazi's words are illustrative: 'To capture Dacca, the Indians would have had to fight hard and suffer heavy losses in destroying my force, but to



their good luck, the blunders of our High Command enabled them to turn what would have been a military stalemate into a victory.<sup>110</sup> The war definitely would have lasted much longer without the use of offensive air, and would have possibly precluded any decisive outcome due to international intervention. Air power, in this case, not only prevailed upon the enemy air but also force-multiplied the surface campaign towards defeating the enemy army.

### Tailpiece

An interesting anecdote is highly illuminative of the spirit of the IAF pilots. Squadron Leader D.S. Jaffa—who was Lal's staff officer in the war and chose to go back to his squadron to fight—was shot down and taken a prisoner of war. He was interrogated by Brigadier General Chuck Yeager, famous for being the first pilot to break the speed of sound, and sent by the US to assess aircraft wreckage of Soviet origin. When told by Jaffa that there was no special guidance equipment provided by the Russians which explained the accuracy of IAF strikes, he asked:

‘Then how come your pilots were finding the targets so accurately by night? Not a single failure.’ ‘Come on’, Jaffa taunted, ‘Why can’t you accept the simple fact that a little bit of accurate flying with a compass, a speedometer, and a wrist watch will take you unerringly to wherever you want to go, every time! So, tell me what are you really after?’ As the visitors were saying their goodbye Jaffa looked at the American and said, ‘Are you going to place the Seventh Fleet in the Arabian Sea next? For this part of Pakistan’ There was no reply. The Yankee shrugged his shoulders and walked out.<sup>111</sup>

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