

# Land Warfare in the Eastern Theatre

## 1971 Indo-Pak War

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*The formation of Bangladesh resulted from the military operations undertaken in erstwhile East Pakistan by the Indian Armed Forces. The Indian Air Force established air superiority in the first few days which enabled land operations to be executed smoothly. The Indian Army outclassed the Pakistan Army by avoiding capture of towns and built-up areas. They headed for the capital Dacca which was the centre of gravity of the operations. The operations were preceded by detailed planning, logistics build up and war gaming which led to outclassing the enemy in the field. Dexterity was displayed in Airborne and Heliborne operations. The Mukti Bahini played a stellar role in providing intelligence as also undertaking small operations in depth areas. Finally, General JFR Jacob skillfully negotiated the surrender with the Pakistani Commander-in-Chief, General AAK Niazi. This has been the biggest victory for Independent India.*

Keywords: *Dacca, Strategy, Heliborne, Jacob*

### INTRODUCTION

India has fought three wars with Pakistan, in 1947–48, 1965 and 1971, all initiated by Pakistan. Though India responded with alacrity and military precision to these wars, it is the 1971 Indo-Pak War that was a classical victory for it. This war witnessed the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The war also resulted in India becoming an important regional power in South Asia. The 1971 war was

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the result of the political turmoil which occurred post-general elections conducted in 1970 in Pakistan. This article will focus on land warfare as it pertained to the eastern theatre of operations. I would like to add here that I was fortunate to serve with Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) J.S. Aurora, Lt Gen Sagat Singh, Lt Gen J.F.R. Jacob, Lt Gen I.S. Gill, Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma, Major General (Maj Gen) Ian Cardozo, Brigadier (Brig) P.K. Ghosh and Colonel (Col) D.K. Chand. During the war, it was indeed inspiring to hear and discuss the nuances of the land campaign with these illustrious leaders.<sup>1</sup>

#### EVOLUTION OF PLANS AND STRATEGY

The central thesis of operations in the eastern theatre during the 1971 war was to liberate East Pakistan in a short intense war. India had to exploit air supremacy and launch offensive actions from numerous directions to reach the centre of gravity, which was Dacca, capital of East Pakistan. In order to attain the same, India was fortunate to have Maj Gen J.F.R. Jacob (later Lt Gen) as the Chief of Staff, Eastern Command, in whom the Army Commander and the Chief of Army Staff had implicit faith. He was clear about the geographical challenges:

1. Broad deltaic plain subject to frequent flooding and a small hilly region near Chittagong. Offensive operations would be difficult during the monsoons.
2. Numerous rivers, most of them originating in India, with the Padma, the Jamuna and the Meghna being the major ones. Offensive operations would entail river crossing with land expedients or by helicopter.
3. Roads were few and had numerous culverts and bridges.
4. Built-up areas were densely populated and could easily be defended. It was best to bypass and move to the centre of gravity.
5. The Indian border was stretched across many states and most of the areas were connected by metre gauge railway lines. It was indeed difficult to logistically build up launch pads in Tripura due to communication problems.
6. Eastern Command had land borders in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh with China. To minimise Chinese interference, the mountain passes needed to be closed, which naturally moved the campaign to winter.

These challenges definitely impacted the contours of the offensive strategy. By May 1971, Maj Gen Jacob had formulated the strategic outline as under:

1. The final objective was to be Dacca, the geopolitical and geostrategic heart of East Pakistan.
2. Thrust lines were to be selected to isolate and bypass Pakistani forces to finally reach the objective.
3. Subsidiary objectives were to be selected with the aim of securing communication centres and the destruction of the enemy's command and control capabilities.
4. Areas which were well defended and fortified were to be bypassed and dealt with later.
5. Preliminary operations to be aimed at drawing out the Pakistani forces to the border, leaving key areas in the interior lightly defended.<sup>2</sup>

Eastern Command, which was tasked to launch the operations, had to provide security to the country against Chinese aggression, which could emanate from Sikkim and Kameng sector in Arunachal Pradesh. Further, it had to contain the insurgencies in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizo Hills. There was also a commitment to defend Bhutan in the event of a Chinese offensive. Since it was not practicable to deal with war on two fronts, it was decided that it is best to wait for winter when the passes would close and minimum strengths could be kept for holding action against the Chinese. Accordingly, troops to be left for the Chinese would be two divisions in Sikkim and two divisions in Arunachal Pradesh, catering for a division contingency in Bhutan. As regards counter-insurgency tasks, about two brigades would be available for Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

From the Eastern Command resources, troops available for operations would be 8 Mountain Division less a brigade, 23 Mountain Division, 20 Mountain Division and 57 Mountain Division. Out of this, some divisions did not have their artillery component. Army Headquarters (HQ) decided to allot 9 Infantry Division, 4 Mountain Division, 340 Mountain Brigade Group and a battalion group of 50 Parachute Brigade.

#### **ACTIONS BEFORE ISSUE OF OPERATIONAL INSTRUCTIONS FROM ARMY HQ**

At the outset, administrative planning had to be done before the monsoons set in; thus, this had to be done before the Army HQ

operational instructions were issued. Poor road and rail communications, particularly in Tripura, meant early preparations. The Sub Area HQ was moved from Assam to Tripura to organise infrastructure. Orders were issued for the placement of one month's requirement of ammunition, stores and supplies to commence immediately at Teliamura in Tripura, one division at Dharamnagar in Tripura, two divisions at Krishnanagar in West Bengal, one division at Raiganj in north Bengal and one division plus at Tura in Meghalaya.

Tentative allotment of troops to task at the preliminary stage was as follows:

1. *North-western sector*: 20 Mountain Division, with 340 Mountain Brigade Group under command, was to capture Bogra.
2. *Western sector*: 9 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division were to capture Jessore, Magura and if opportunity permitted, to move to Dacca using the inland water flotilla. A corps HQ was needed to command this force and HQ 2 Corps was soon to be raised.
3. *South-eastern sector*: It was proposed to allot 23 Mountain Division, 8 Mountain Division less a brigade and 57 Mountain Division. HQ 4 Corps was to command this force. The Chief of Staff was to be left behind to look after any issues on the Chinese front. The objectives were to secure the area up to the Meghna, to include Chandpur and Daikundi. Ahead there was a requirement of helicopters to cross this major water obstacle and move on to Dacca.
4. *North-eastern sector*: Eastern Command proposed that they needed another division plus on the Jamalpur–Tangail–Dacca axis. The parachute battalion could be utilised to drop at Tangail.
5. *Mukti Bahini*: Support of them were visualised for all phases of the operation.

In August 1971, a meeting was held in the operations room of Eastern Command. The Chief (Gen Sam Manekshaw), Army Commander (Lt Gen J.S. Aurora), Director Military Operations (DMO) and Maj Gen Jacob were present. The DMO spelt out the objectives, maintaining that if the Indian Army captured Khulna and Chittagong, which were entry ports, the war would come to an end. The Hardinge Bridge on the Padma was also to be secured. The only one who disagreed was Jacob. He explained that in the event of hostilities, we should utilise

our naval superiority and have an effective blockade in place. Further, Khulna was only a minor port. As far as Chittagong was concerned, it was almost peripheral, away from the centre of gravity, too far to the east. He maintained that the geopolitical heart of East Pakistan was Dacca. Capture of Dacca was imperative for India to control Pakistan. Manekshaw asked Jacob if by taking Khulna and Chittagong, Dacca would automatically fall. Jacob said that this was unlikely and therefore, Dacca should be the key objective. Manekshaw made changes to the plan and in the planning period, for most part, bypassed the Army Commander and dealt directly with the Chief of Staff, Jacob.<sup>3</sup> The operational instructions were issued and each formation war-gamed their plans. Original plans underwent suitable modifications after discussions. As far as possible, built-up areas were to be contained and the aim was to reach key areas in depth.

#### MUKTI BAHINI

Mukti Bahini is the appellation of the forces of the Bangladesh War of Liberation. The precursor of the organisation was the Mukti Fauj, which was preceded by the Sangram Parishads formed in the cities and villages by student and youth leaderships in early March 1971. The Mukti Bahini included fighting elements from two main streams: members of armed forces of erstwhile East Pakistan; and members of the urban and rural Sangram Parishads.<sup>4</sup> There were two distinct groups in it, namely, the Niyomito Bahini (regular army) and the Gano Bahini (the people's army). The Niyomito Bahini had under it the Swadhin Bangla Regiment and the Mukti Fauj. The Gano Bahini was divided into three parts: Suicide Squads, Scorpion Squads and Toofan Bahini (storm troops). The Swadhin Bangla Regiment was the backbone of the organisation, comprising of members belonging to regular army regiments, the East Bengal Regiment and the East Pakistan Rifles.<sup>5</sup>

On the request of the provisional Government of Bangladesh, the Government of India directed the Indian Army to provide necessary assistance to the Mukti Bahini. This was known as 'Operation Jackpot'. Their operational HQ was located at Calcutta. Col M.G. Osmani was the head, with Wing Commander Khondkar as his deputy. The sector responsibility was given to the following officers:

1. Major (Maj) Zia, responsible for Chittagong;
2. Maj Khalid Musharraf, Comilla;

3. Maj Safiullah, Mymensingh;
4. Wing Commander Bashar, Rangpur;
5. Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) Zaman, Rajshahi;
6. Maj Usman, Kushtia;
7. Maj Jalil, Khulna; and
8. Tiger Siddiqui opted to operate from his own area in Tangail, as did Noorul Kadar and Toha.

The forces were to be trained for three months. Once trained, they would penetrate deep into East Pakistan to form cells and function as guerilla forces. Further, a large number of personnel were to make the existing East Bengal battalions up to strength, as also man the additional battalions and arty batteries that Col Osmani planned to raise. In addition, about 400 naval commandos and frogmen were trained, particularly for attacking port facilities and vessels. For example, a Mukti Bahini gunboat, mounting a 40 mm Bofors air defence gun, captured, sank or damaged some 15 Pakistani ships, seven gunboats, 11 barges, two tankers and 19 river craft. There were a number of small team actions which were also fruitful, such as the forces assisted the Indian Army in the advance to Sylhet.<sup>6</sup> These were indeed creditable achievements. It is to the credit of Indian Army officers, like Captain (later Col) D.K. Chand, who operated with the Mukti Bahini, which began at the Jalalpur camp in the foothills of Shillong. Overall, the achievements of Mukti Bahini were a key factor in the liberation struggle. Their contributions were a crucial element in the operations prior to and during full-scale hostilities.

#### PAKISTANI ORDER OF BATTLE

At the helm of Pakistani forces was Lt Gen A.A.K. Niazi, along with HQ Eastern Command. The Pakistani order of battle at the commencement of hostilities was as follows:

1. *North-western sector*: 16 Infantry Division, under Maj Gen Nazar Hussain, with HQ at Nator. The division deployed 23 Infantry Brigade of four battalions in the area of Dinajpur–Rangpur; 205 Infantry Brigade in the area of Hilli–Ghoraghat; and 34 Infantry Brigade in the area of Rajshahi–Naogaon.<sup>7</sup>
2. *Western sector*: 9 Infantry Division was deployed in the area of Jessore. Maj Gen M.H. Ansari was the General Officer Commanding (GOC). Around Jessore was deployed a squadron

of armour, two field regiments and one mortar battery. In addition, 107 Infantry Brigade was deployed in the same area, whereas 57 Infantry Brigade was deployed in Jhendia–Meherpur–Jibannagar. Some elements were dispersed to indicate a large quantum of troops in the area. They simulated large quantum of signal traffic in the area.

3. *South-eastern sector*: The area was under 14 Infantry Division. Maj Gen Abdul Majid Quazi was the GOC. They had deployed a squadron of armour, two field regiments and one heavy mortar battery in the northern part of this sector. The HQ was initially at Dacca, but later moved to Bhairab Bazaar. The 17 Infantry Brigade was in the area of Akhaura–Kasba–Brahman Baria; 313 Infantry Brigade was at Maulvi Bazaar; and 202 Infantry Brigade was at Sylhet. The 39 Infantry Division, commanded by Maj Gen Rahim Khan, occupied the southern part of this sector, with HQ at Chandpur. The 117 Infantry Brigade was in area of Maynamati; 53 Infantry Brigade of two battalions was in area of Feni; and 91 Infantry Brigade, comprising of one regular battalion, was at Faujdahat–Ramgarh. The remaining part of the brigade was deployed in the area of Chittagong, including its hill tracts.
4. *North-eastern sector*: HQ 36 Infantry Division was formed from the Director General of East Pakistan's Civil Armed Forces. It had under its command 93 Infantry Brigade, together with one battery deployed in the area of Jamalpur–Mymensingh. One brigade worth of troops was located in Dacca.
5. *Additional troops*: In addition to these regular troops, each division was given large numbers of East Pakistan civil armed police.

#### RELATIVE STRENGTH

It is evident that Indian forces were numerically a little more than the Pakistani regulars. Though there was need for an additional division and a brigade for the north-eastern sector, 6 Mountain Division and 123 Infantry Brigade could not be employed due to the possible threat from China. There were formations like 8 Mountain Division, which had no artillery; and 57 Mountain Division, which had limited artillery. Further, there was scarcity of light armour and bridging equipment.

#### PRELIMINARY OPERATIONS

Pakistani troops started shelling around end of October 1971. As the border outposts were under artillery attack, it was decided to let troops go into East Pakistan up to a depth of 16 kilometre (km) to silence the Pakistani artillery. This resulted in 'improvement of defensive posture'. Formations were instructed to carry out the following tasks:

1. *2 Corps*: Invest enemy defences in the area of Afra and capture Mohammadpur.
2. *33 Corps*: Clear Pachgarh and advance as far south as possible towards Thakurgaon; capture Hilli.
3. *101 Communications Zone Area*: Capture Jaintiapur and Kamalpur; advance to Bakshiganj; intensify Mukti Bahini activity in Tangail; and threaten Mymensingh, Haluaghat, Phulpur, Shamganj and Durgapur.
4. *4 Corps*: Capture Gangasagar and clear up to Saidabad; establish a battalion block in the area of Debigram; isolate Akhaura and Brahman Baria; eliminate Pakistani border outposts in the area of Narayanpur; capture Rajpur and threaten Akhaura; secure Shamsheernagar and Kalaura; and isolate Feni.

All this assisted in greatly ascertaining issues and improving our defence posture. In the western sector of 2 Corps, Chaugacha was firmly in the hands of Mukti Bahini by 29 November. The 9 Infantry Division reached halfway between the border and Jessore. Similarly, 4 Mountain Division captured Jibannagar, Uthali and Darsana. In 33 Corps sector, 71 Mountain Brigade captured Thakurgaon. Outskirts of Hilli were captured, but heavy resistance was encountered at Hilli. In 4 Corps sector, the salient east of the line Chargam–Karimganj had been captured and Kalaura invested. In the Akhaura area, Gangasagar had been captured. Further south, the whole of Belonia Bulge had been cleared. In 101 Communications Zone Area sector, 95 Mountain Brigade met heavy resistance in the capture of Kamalpur.

These preliminary operations reinforced Eastern Command's strategic concept that fortified positions had to be bypassed. The Pakistanis were thrown off balance and the strategy of drawing the Pakistanis to the border began to work. Gen Niazi concentrated on the defence of Jessore, Jhendia, Bogra, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Bhairab Bazaar, Comilla and Chittagong. He ordered these towns to be



the nodal areas for defence. This strategy left open subsidiary axes, which Indian forces proposed to use.

**BRIDGING EQUIPMENT, MOVEMENT OF STORES,  
SIGNAL COMMUNICATIONS, VEHICLES AND SCARCITY OF ARTILLERY**

East Pakistan was a land of rivers and it was crucial to have bridging equipment for successful operations. By mid-August 1971, Eastern Command received Bailey pontoon bridge and folding boat equipment. Assault boats arrived late and were in position only a few days before the operations began. The chief engineer and his staff left no stone unturned to get the entire equipment ready for operations.

It was a herculean task to move stores to the corps' maintenance areas. A wise decision was to commence the movement in July and the dumping was complete before the operations commenced. The most difficult were the areas earmarked for 4 Corps in Tripura. These were established at Teliamura, Udaipur and Dharamnagar. Some 30,000 tonnes of stores were moved to these locations. Regarding others, 14,000 tonnes was moved to Krishnanagar for 2 Corps; 7,000 tonnes to Raigarh for 33 Corps; and 4,000 tonnes to Tura for 101 Communications Zone's thrust to Dacca.

Signal communications were highly underdeveloped, particularly in Tripura and Meghalaya. Further, the existing network was inadequate. Eastern Command had to create a new signal communications infrastructure for the entire launch pads, from 4 Corps in Tripura, 2 Corps in Krishnanagar to 101 Communications Zone in Tura, Meghalaya. The 33 Corps was the only formation where communications could be provided with lesser effort. Greater reliance was placed on electronic teleprinter circuits which were secure and successful.

Innovation was the order of the day. Mountain divisions were short of vehicles and there was a huge requirement of transport. Army HQ was unable to provide vehicles but offered 100 chassis. These were driven to the vehicle depot at Panagarh, which was holding a large quantity of vehicles to be discarded. During September–October 1971, the old vehicle bodies were removed and fitted on to these chassis; and this served the purpose. Further, teams were sent as far away as central India to hire more than 2,000 civil load carriers. To overcome shortage of spares for small arms and tanks, Brig Sethna approached his friends in civil trade, who procured these items and handed them over to the units.

The divisional artillery of the formations being launched were mostly mountain guns. The 8 Mountain Division had no artillery and there were only two 5.5 inch Medium Regiments both deployed on the Chinese border. There was no other option but to take artillery resources from the Chinese border for operations against the East Pakistan. Later, one Medium Regiment possessing 130 mm guns was allotted by Army HQ. Further, HQ 2 Artillery Brigade was placed under HQ 2 Corps. Apart from these, huge dumping of ammunition was undertaken well before the operations. The best part was that once operations started, troops never had to look back.

#### PROGRESS OF OPERATIONS

Full-scale hostilities commenced on 4 December 1971 and most of the formations were engaged against Pakistani defences. The Indian Army offensive proceeded as follows:

1. *2 Corps sector*: 9 Infantry Division was knocking on the doors of Jessore by 6 December. Pakistanis withdrew from Jessore and moved to Daulatpur, Khulna and east of Madhumati River. While 9 Infantry Division moved towards Khulna, HQ Eastern Command wanted it to move towards Faridpur. The 4 Mountain Division captured Darsana and Kotchandpur by 5 December. Magura fell on 8 December and the Madhumati ferry was contacted. After the capture of Magura, 62 Mountain Brigade commenced the advance towards Faridpur. The brigade moved to the west bank of the Madhumati and was preparing for the crossing. In the meantime, 7 Mountain Brigade of 4 Mountain Division, which was sent to Kushtia, ran into stiff opposition from a depleted brigade and a squadron of light tanks. At this juncture, 62 Mountain Brigade, which was poised towards Faridpur onwards to Dacca, was diverted to Kushtia, thus delaying the advance to Faridpur onwards to Dacca. The focus on Kushtia led to crossing of the Madhumati on 14 December. This delayed utilisation of 2 Corps for possible use against Dacca.
2. *33 Corps sector*: Operations in this sector were primarily confined to securing of the Hilli–Gaibanda waistline, advance to Bogra and advance to Rangpur. The 20 Mountain Division had positioned 165 Mountain Brigade to hold a firm base in the Balurghat Bulge and 340 Mountain Brigade for investing

Dinajpur from the south. Two brigades, 66 and 202 Mountain Brigades, were to be utilised for the main thrust to Pirganj. While 66 Mountain Brigade captured Phulbari, 202 Mountain Brigade could not proceed beyond Hilli. The plans underwent a change and the two brigades maintained the momentum to Pirganj. The 66 Mountain Brigade met with stiff opposition at Bhaduria, and this could be cleared only by 11 December 1971. Meanwhile, 340 Mountain Brigade made a rapid advance and captured Pirganj on 7 December, Palashbari on 9 December, Gaibanda and Phulchari ferry on 10 December, securing the waistline and isolating Pakistani forces in the Dinajpur–Rangpur belt. The brigade pressed on further south and in an enveloping move, captured Gobindganj on 11 December. Hilli finally fell on 11 December and the next was advance to Bogra. By executing enveloping movements, 340 Mountain Brigade, 165 Mountain Brigade and 202 Mountain Brigade could capture the outskirts of Bogra. The next step was the advance to Rangpur, which was undertaken by 66 Mountain Brigade, followed by 202 Mountain Brigade. They were able to capture Miktapur against light opposition, and Rangpur had been invested from the south-west and south by two brigades.

3. *4 Corps sector:* The Corps Commander, Lt Gen Sagat Singh, was clear that time was limited and it was extremely necessary to cross the rivers and threaten Dacca. With this aim in mind, the first task was the isolation of Sylhet by 8 Mountain Division. On 6 December, 59 Mountain Brigade captured Kalaura. By 5 December, 81 Mountain Brigade had captured Munshi Bazaar and on 7 December, after heavy resistance, they isolated the Maulvi Bazaar defences. The Pakistanis were somehow convinced that Sylhet must hold out. They moved 311 Infantry Brigade to Sylhet from Maulvi Bazaar, reinforcing 202 Infantry Brigade. This was advantageous to 4 Corps as it found the passage over Meghna River practically uncontested. Meanwhile, 57 Mountain Division encircled and captured Ashuganj by 5 December. They now advanced towards Brahman Baria. By 9 December, the Pakistanis withdrew, blew up the Coronation Bridge and pulled back to Bhairab Bazaar. In the meantime, 23 Mountain Division was able to execute advances towards Laksham–Comilla and Chandpur. Comilla was vacated on

9 December and about 1,500 personnel surrendered between Comilla and Daudkandi. Laksham was also occupied on 9 December. The Meghna Bulge was secured and Maynamati was invested by the corps commander. This was followed by Heli-landings across the Meghna (covered later in the article). Dacca was being threatened and tremendous psychological pressure mounted on the East Pakistan Army Commander, Gen Niazi.

4. *101 Communications Zone*: The task of 95 Mountain Brigade was to capture Mymensingh. In October, the brigade moved to the concentration area at Tura in Meghalaya.<sup>8</sup> The enemy garrison at Kamalpur finally surrendered to 95 Mountain Brigade on 4 December 1971. Jamalpur was encircled and held out until 11 December and 95 Mountain Brigade resumed its advance south of Jamalpur on 12 December. In the meantime, 2 PARA was para-dropped at Tangail on the evening of 11 December and captured Poongli Bridge on the Jamuna.

#### HELIBORNE OPERATIONS ACROSS THE MEGHNA

In order to threaten Dacca, operations had to be undertaken to cross rivers. As bridges had been destroyed by the enemy force, heliborne operations and para landings had to be conducted. The 4 Corps left no stone unturned to cross the Meghna using helicopters. Group Captain Chandan Singh, Commander of Air Force Station Jorhat, had Mi-4 helicopters. He started directly interacting with Gen Sagat Singh, GOC 4 Corps, with effect from 3 December 1971. On 6 December, 110 Helicopter Unit, under Squadron Leader Sandhu, arrived at Kailashahar. The first heliborne operations were launched with 4/5 Gorkha Rifles over Sylhet. The next was the crossings over the Meghna.

On 8 December 1971, Chandan Singh was asked to meet Maj Gen Gonsalves, the GOC of 57 Mountain Division at Brahman Baria. The GOC was stuck on the east bank of the Meghna River as the Pakistanis had demolished the bridge connecting Ashuganj and Bhairab Bazaar. As Bhairab Bazaar was held in strength, he wished to lift a battalion group to Raipura. It was decided to initially undertake an armed reconnaissance. On 9 December, an armed reconnaissance was undertaken, with Gen Sagat Singh participating in it. A helipad was selected and 11 Mi-4 helicopters were available for the mission. The operations commenced at 1400 hours on the same day. In this mission, 27 sorties were carried out

by day and 30 sorties were done by night, and 4 Guards was heli-lifted successfully.

Gen Sagat Singh, on 11 December, directed that an entire brigade and an artillery regiment be airlifted across the Meghna. This entailed 150 sorties, with each helicopter undertaking about 14–15 sorties. The helicopters, being serviced at Agartala, had to airlift the troops to Narsingdi. By mid-day on 11 December, the sorties commenced and continued till early morning of 12 December. In all, 135 sorties were undertaken and a total of 1,628 troops were landed with arms, ammunition, artillery and rations.<sup>9</sup> Moving to Narsingdi involved crossing six water courses. Though there were a few engine breakdowns and forced landings, the helicopters did a great job.

The troops reaching close to Dacca built up the psychological pressure. The next was to lift troops of 23 Mountain Division from Daudkandi to Narayanganj, which was about 30 km to the south-east of Dacca. This started on 14 December and 80 sorties by day and 42 by night were undertaken. All of this contributed to threaten Dacca, leading to its surrender. Both Gen Aurora and Gen Sagat Singh stated these little helicopters, Mi-4, were worth their weight in gold.<sup>10</sup>

#### AIRBORNE ASSAULT

The 2 PARA, led by Lt Col K.S. Pannu, undertook the first airborne assault in enemy territory. The operation took place on 11 December at Tangail in Bangladesh. The battalion group included a para field battery from 17 Para Field Regiment, 411 Para Field Company and other components of the arms and services. On 9 December, the battalion was moved to the two mounting bases at Dumdum and Kalaikunda. Maj P.K. Ghosh was infiltrated through 95 Mountain Brigade by the Mukti Bahini to Tangail. He selected the dropping zones (DZs) for the mission. The task was to capture Poongli Bridge and the adjacent ferry on the Lohajung River near Tangail, approximately 70 miles north-west of Dacca. The aim was to defeat the enemy forces withdrawing from Jamalpur and Mymensingh towards Tangail. Link up was to be established by 95 Mountain Brigade. The pathfinders took off around 1400 hours on 11 December from Dumdum and 20 minutes later, the battalion group were airborne. The drop was widespread, about 2.5 miles. After a quick rendezvous, the pathfinders marked the DZ and were ready to receive the main drop. The battalion regroup after the drop was quick and they moved to Poongli Bridge. The bridge was captured

and a Pakistani brigade withdrawing was disintegrated. Link up took place with 101 Communications Zone Area units on the evening of 12 December. After 13 December, the battle progressed but Pakistanis offered stiff resistance. On the morning of 16 December, a message was received that the Pakistan had agreed to surrender.<sup>11</sup> Rest was left to Maj Gen Jacob to negotiate with Gen Niazi.

#### NEGOTIATING THE SURRENDER

The Indian Air Force bombed the governor's house on 14 December and the governor, in panic, resigned. At the time, news channels had reported that 5,000 paratroopers had landed at Tangail instead of a battalion group. Further, 101 Communications Zone and troops of 4 Corps were threatening Dacca. Gen Manekshaw wisely asked the Pakistanis to surrender. India issued a unilateral ceasefire from 1500 hours on 15 December. On 16 December, Maj Gen Jacob was directed by the Indian Army Chief to go to Dacca and get a surrender from Gen Niazi. He landed at Dacca and read out the terms of surrender. Gen Niazi insisted that he agreed only to the ceasefire. However, Gen Jacob pulled Niazi aside and insisted that they surrender. He gave him 30 minutes to consider and after that, Gen Niazi reluctantly agreed and the ceremony took place the same evening.<sup>12</sup>

#### ISSUES MERITING IMPORTANCE

It is half a century since the 1971 Indo-Pak War and the creation of Bangladesh. A few issues merit attention here that helped us win the war:

1. Clarity of objective is essential. Dacca was most important and this was possibly clear to HQ Eastern Command, who could swing the campaign in India's favour.
2. Importance of ensuring one front is dormant while undertaking operations. Care was taken to ensure that the Chinese front was guarded but remained inactive. Even today, as far as possible, a war on two fronts should be avoided.
3. The importance of air dominance for operations by land or sea.
4. Intelligence remains the key to success in operations. Signal intelligence provided key inputs to the entire campaign. Even today, there is a dire need of good intelligence.
5. Lack of light armour and artillery. These remain short even today. We need to address these issues with speed and military

- precision. This is particularly needed for operations in riverine and mountainous regions, including high altitude.
6. Civil–military cooperation is of utmost importance.
  7. Integration between the three services is a requirement, which is correctly being addressed currently.
  8. Logistics need detailed planning, and preparation must begin early to ensure successful operations.
  9. Need for developing capabilities for launching amphibious operations is extremely important.
  10. Heliborne operations and airborne operations are extremely important for speedy execution of tasks.
  11. Media, in all its forms, has an important role. Foreign correspondents and media played an important role in the 1971 war. In the current environment too, social media plays an important role as part of information warfare, and thus must be managed correctly.
  12. Military diplomacy is extremely important. As seen in 1971, Maj Gen Jacob was simply brilliant in convincing Lt Gen Niazi to surrender.

#### NOTES

1. I was fortunate to be posted in a mountain corps, forming part of Eastern Command where these luminaries met and spoke about the complexities of the eastern theatre. Further discussions with them took place at other locations where close interaction was possible.
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7. Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca*, n. 2, p. 102.
8. Hardev S. Kler, ‘Making of a Plan, the Capture of Dhaka’, in Katoch and Zahir (eds), *Liberation: Bangladesh–1971*, n. 6, p. 65.

9. Chandan Singh, 'The Meghna Crossing', in Katoch and Zahir (eds), *Liberation: Bangladesh-1971*, n. 6, pp. 218-22.
10. Ibid.
11. Nirbhay Sharma, 'The Story of Indian Army's First Airborne Assault', in Katoch and Zahir (eds), *Liberation Bangladesh-1971*, n. 6, pp. 133-40.
12. J.F.R. Jacob, 'Niazi Bested', in Katoch and Zahir (eds), *Liberation Bangladesh-1971*, n. 6, pp. 229-38.