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THE 1971 BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR HELI-BORNE ASSAULT ON SYLHET

BHUPINDER S. NIJJAR

THE GOLDEN JUBILEE AIRCRAFT EXCHANGE AND MI-4

As the relationship entered its 50th year, Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, PVSM AVSM VM ADC, Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) of the Indian Air Force (IAF), visited Bangladesh on February 22, 2021, to cement the professional ties and friendship between the respective Air Forces.¹ In a key event, the two sides exchanged mementoes of the IAF Alouette III and Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) F-86. While the museums in the respective countries gained the fully restored versions of the aircraft, it also signified the vital role of the “Chetak” during the Indo-Pak war for Bangladesh’s liberation.² An IAF Mi-4 helicopter (Z-2401) already occupied a place of honour at the BAF museum.³

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1. Indian Air Force, “CAS Visit to Bangladesh”, at <https://indianairforce.nic.in/content/cas-visit-bangladesh>. Accessed on March 10, 2021.
2. Twitter.com, “IAF_MCC Post Dated Feb 26”, at https://twitter.com/IAF_MCC/status/1365318571908235266?s=20. Accessed on March 10, 2021.
3. Sheikh Takdir, “Bangladesh Air Force Museum (BAF Museum) | Bangladesh Biman Bahini Jadughor”, YouTube, September 8, 2019, at <https://youtu.be/MbzATNA1WiM>. Accessed on March 20, 2021.

Almost 50 years ago, Bangladesh was liberated from the clutches of an oppressive regime on December 16, 1971. The comprehensive Pakistani defeat was formalised with Pakistani troops' commander in East-Pakistan, General AAK Niazi, signing the surrender document in Dacca.

The Alouette and the Mi-4s had played a stellar role in the comprehensive Pakistani defeat. Both the Alouette III and Mi-4 helicopters, along with their pilots, had witnessed the war and its battles at close quarters. On December 16, 1971, with the airfield at Dhaka being out of commission, it was apt that both the aircraft were present to witness the signing of the surrender document at Dhaka. They heli-lifted dignitaries from Agartala as well as Calcutta. This "heli-lift" was the final operation undertaken by the IAF helicopters in East-Pakistan. They flew into East Pakistan and returned to India from Bangladesh.

This paper examines the role of these two helicopters in the first of a series of heli-borne assaults and heli-bridging operations undertaken—the assault on Sylhet.

THE ALOUETTE III AND THE MI-4 HELICOPTER

The Alouette III is a small helicopter that can accommodate five passengers in addition to the two pilots. In its casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) avatar, it is capable of carrying two stretchers.⁴ It was also among the first aircraft to have been flown by the BAF pilots. The Mi-4 was a larger troop transport helicopter capable of carrying up to 1,600 kg load.⁵ Due to the vintage of the fleet and operating conditions, ten fully equipped troops and equipment was the usual complement of the load carried.⁶ It was also capable of carrying eight stretchers in the CASEVAC role.

Pakistan officially declared war on December 3, 1971. However, on the eastern front, other than the skirmishes, the battle actually commenced with the battle of Akhaura on December 1, 1971. The

4. "SA316/SA319 Alouette III Light Utility Helicopter", *Airforce Technology*, at <https://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/a316sa319alouetteiii/>. Accessed on March 22, 2021.

5. "Mil Mi-4 1952", *Aviastar.org*, at http://www.aviastar.org/helicopters_eng/mi-4.php. Accessed on March 22, 2021.

6. Gp Capt RV Singh, VM, (Retd), Personal Interaction at his residence, Noida, March 14, 2021.

few Alouette helicopters available until the Mi-4s were mainly used in reconnaissance and observation (R&O) roles. The Mi-4s were to augment the existing helicopters for R&O and CASEVAC tasks.

By December 3, 1971, the progress of battle at Akhaura had provided the necessary feedback about the fact the enemy had cleverly used the peculiarities of terrain with its numerous creeks to build robust defences. Although they were overcome eventually, however, the costs in terms of casualties and the time taken were alarming. The arrival of the Mi-4s provided an opportunity to overcome these costs.

Accordingly, the first of Special Heli-Borne Operation (SHBO)⁷ tasks were proposed to be undertaken at “Sylhet”.

However, the Alouette III involvement had started with establishing the “Mukti Fauj” much earlier.

MUKTI FAUJ AND THE F-86E EPISODE

Post the brutal crackdown on the Bengali-speaking population in East Pakistan, lakhs of Bengali refugees started streaming into India. People’s anger was channelised by creating “*The Mukti Bahini*”. Mr. K. F. Rustamji, who led the Border Security Force (BSF), was authorised to extend help to the Bengali refugees, willing to fight back, as early as March 29, 1971.⁸

On April 17, the Bangladesh government in exile, led by its Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, proclaimed independence for a “*sovereign democratic republic of Bangladesh*” from a point inside East Pakistan.⁹

By May 1971, the Indian Army had taken charge of training the “Mukti Fauj” and utilised the trained personnel who had defected from the East Bengal Regiment and the East Pakistan Rifles. Gradually the “Mukti Bahini” force transformed itself as Bangladesh Forces with General MAG Osmani as its Commander-in-Chief and continued their sustained activities against the now occupying Pakistani forces.

The skirmishes between opposing forces began to increase, and Pakistan Air Force was using the F-86E armed with GAR-8 missiles to support its Army. The undeclared war for the liberation of Bangladesh

7. SHBO: A Special Heli-Borne Operation provides necessary momentum to surprise the enemy and multiply the chances of success of overall plan at higher level.

8. Lt Col Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, “This Is the Way My Boy”, in Maj Gen Dhruv C. Katoch and Lt Col Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir (eds.), *Liberation Bangladesh 1971, First-hand, untold, action stories from the war zone* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 95.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

was already unofficially underway, led by the Bengalis themselves. With the war clouds clearly on the horizon, both sides prepared for what was about to unfold.

THE INDIAN MILITARY AIM AND PAKISTANI PLANS

As per the then IAF Chief, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, the initial Indian military aims were:¹⁰

... to gain as much ground as possible in the east, to neutralise the Pakistani forces there to the extent we could, and to establish a base as it were for a possible state of Bangladesh. In the West, the objective was to hold the Pakistani forces.

As the events unfolded, it was clear that the Bengalis will not accept anything short of complete independence. However, the area of 148,460 sq km¹¹ was being defended by a professional army. The land boundary with India was over 4,142 km long, and the power centre of East Pakistan, Dacca (now Dhaka), was safely ensconced by natural river systems from three sides formed by the delta of the mighty Padma (formed with the confluence of Ganga and Brahmaputra—known as Jamuna in Bengal) and the Meghna river systems. A military commander could not have asked for more help from nature to ensure an area's defence. The Indian Army was also known to be short of crucial equipment, which included bridging equipment and was well aware of the prospects of waging a three-front war. That is, in the West and East with Pakistan and on its northern borders with China.

As per the Pakistani plan, the primary battle with India was to be won on the Western front. This fact is stated by Lt Gen AAK Niazi under whom the war in East Pakistan was fought:¹²

10. Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 171.

11. CIA.gov, "The World Factbook: Bangladesh", at <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bangladesh/>. Accessed on March 20, 2021.

12. Lt Gen AAK Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1998), p. xxx.

The plans for both the theatre of operations were concomitant and interlinked ... the main battle was to be fought and won on the western front.

The Pakistani plan did not cater to the ground reality of a civil war. However, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had requisitioned Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and had airlifted at least two¹³ additional infantry divisions (9 and 16) to East Pakistan via Sri Lanka. This did bolster the Pakistani military presence almost six months before the commencement of war on December 3, 1971, and gave time for robust defences to be created.

Gen Niazi's plan was to prolong the war till the ceasefire was effected due to international pressure or the action on the western front. He had specified it as:

Troops on the border would fight on until ordered to withdraw; while withdrawing to the fortresses, they would fight delaying actions in an attempt to exchange space for time. Finally, they would occupy and defend the fortresses till the end.

These fortresses were strong defensive positions constructed as a part of "*forward defensive posture*" at Bogra, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Jessore, Jhenid, Sylhet, Kamalpur, Bhairab Bazaar, Comilla, Chittagong and Dacca. These were not mutually supportive, and there were no reserves other than some at Dacca. The instructions for the Pakistani formations on the front line were clear and specified that withdrawal would not take place to the fortresses until the concerned unit had suffered 75 per cent casualties.

The air element consisted of 14 Squadron operating from Tejgaon equipped with an estimated 16 Canadair F-86 Sabres and two Lockheed T-33 "shooting star" jet trainers. The Pakistan Army Aviation (PAA) also operated five of the latest Russian Mi-8 twin-engine (turbine) helicopters and four Alouette IIIs for communication and logistic support duties. Two additional Alouettes were positioned for Search and Rescue (SAR) duties with the Sabres.

13. Sajjad Haider, *Flight of the Falcon* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Pvt. Ltd., 2009), p. 234.

However, the Air Defence (AD) cover was significant. It consisted of a well-camouflaged radar (AR-1) and Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) with a coordinated plan to lure IAF aircraft into the designated AAA kill-zones. Interestingly, this radar survived the war.¹⁴

OP-INSTRUCTION NUMBER 53 AND THE HELICOPTER TASKS

On August 16, 1971, Army HQ issued Operational Instruction Number 53, which specified the tasks of the Indian Army as:¹⁵

- Defend Sikkim and NEFA against possible Chinese Aggression.
- Contain insurgency in Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizo Hills.
- Destroy the bulk of the Pak forces in the Eastern Theatre and occupy the major portion of East Bengal including the entry ports of Chittagong and Khulna.

The Indian Air Force, on its part, had the following tasks entrusted to it:¹⁶

- Eliminate the PAF at the earliest.
- Render maximum assistance to the Army in the form of offensive support, transport and helicopter support and airborne operations.
- Assist the Navy to isolate East Pakistan and also ensure that the PAF did not interfere with the operations of Indian naval ships and aircraft.
- Ensure Air Defence of the area of responsibility.

A total of five Helicopter Units (HUs) were stationed in the Eastern sector. These were 105 HU (MI-4), 110 HU (MI-4), 111 HU (MI-4), 112 HU (Alouette III) and 115 HU (Alouette III). In addition, at least two helicopters were operating with the Special Frontier Force (SFF) or the Kilo Force.

The Kilo Force (not to be confused with “Kilo Flight”) or “Uban Force”, which mainly consisted of Tibetans,¹⁷ was inducted at

14. PVS Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *Eagles Over Bangladesh: The Indian Air Force in the 1971 Liberation War* (New Delhi: HarperCollins), p. 368.

15. S. N. Prasad and U. P. Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1971—A History* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, for Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2014), pp. 274-75.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

17. Maj Gen SS Uban, *Phantoms of Chittagong* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1985).

Demagiri by August 1971 for operations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region.

The “Mukti Bahini” fighters were also embedded into the operational plan and were used to gather crucial intelligence, besides undertaking guerrilla operations against the Pak Army, adversely affecting their morale.

IAF had set up an Advance HQ alongside the Army Eastern Command and was responsible for close air support to the Army. Eastern Air Command (EAC) was exercising direct control over all offensive air operations, including Close Air Support to the Army East of Brahmaputra (Padma) and up to Meghna.

The plan for the “Vertical Envelopment” of the enemy and the establishment of the “Kilo flight” were crucial elements of the IAF tasks for its Transport and Helicopter units.

THE PLANNED “VERTICAL ENVELOPMENT” OPERATION

After a detailed terrain analysis, the military campaign had been planned by Lt Gen JS Aurora. By September 1971, the initial plans for airborne operations had been worked out during a meeting attended by Lt Gen Aurora, Brigadier Mathew Thomas (Brigade Commander 50 Independent Para Brigade), Air Cmde S. Purshottam (Air-Officer Commanding, Advance HQ EAC) and Maj Gen JFR Jacob (Chief of Staff Eastern Command).¹⁸ A few possible targets were also discussed, including capturing Kurmitola airfield, key bridges/ferry crossing and a para drop at Tangail to block retreating troops falling back to Dacca.

It was clear that this effort would entail extremely detailed planning and close cooperation among the Air Force and Army elements to succeed. A reasonable amount of air superiority would be a major requirement for the success of the operation. The plans’ feasibility was cross-checked with war games in various formations, including the one in 101 Communication Zones Area (101 CZA) on November 12, 1971.¹⁹

IAF, on its part, appointed a team of officers comprising Gp Capt Gurdeep Singh, Wg Cdr Arjun Ralli, Sqn Ldr SP Maini and Sqn

18. Jagan Mohan and Chopra, n. 14, p. 291.

19. Maj Gen Hardev S. Kler, “Making of a Plan”, in Maj Gen Dhruv C. Katoch and Lt Col Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir (eds.), *Liberation Bangladesh 1971, First-hand, untold, action stories from the war zone* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 67.

Ldr Minoo Vania in November to formulate detailed plans. These plans were approved on November 16 by both the Army GOC-in-C Lt Gen JS Aurora and Air Mshl HC Dewan.²⁰ So, the only “Vertical envelopment” plan involved the use of fixed-wing aircraft.

However, IAF was tasked separately for executing the plan for establishing the “Kilo Flight”, the seed from the BAF germinated. The Kilo Flight was established at Dimapur.

KILO FLIGHT AND IAF HELICOPTER TASKS²¹

Gp Capt (later Air Vice Marshal) Chandan Singh, Station Commander Jorhat, had been called by AOC-in-C EAC Air Marshal Dewan and given the task of resurrecting Bangladesh Air Force and take charge of 100 Bangladeshi airmen and 12 officers (primarily pilots). On September 26, 1971, Flt Lt (later Air Cmde) Chandra Mohan M. Singla, stationed at Bagdogra, was told by his Commanding Officer (CO) to pack his bags (which must include bedding) for four or five weeks. Air Cmde Singla remembers protesting wildly against this move to Tezpur, thinking this to be a tedious desk job when the “balloon was ready to go up”, but it fell on “deaf ears”. He was the selected one; however, he felt “singled out”. The next day Flt Lt Singla was received at Tezpur by CO 115 HU, Squadron Leader Mehtani and was briefed by the AOC to “*take the helicopter provided to Dimapur.*”

On September 28, 1971, Gp Capt Chandan Singh landed in a Dakota at Dimapur with a hand-picked maintenance team led by Flt Lt Ramakrishna.

The task was to train three “Pakistani” pilots who had defected to fly the Chetak. While Sqn Ldr Sultan Ahmed and Flt Lt Badrul Alam had defected from PAF, Capt Shahabuddin Ahmed was a civilian pilot.

Much later, this date, i.e., September 28, 1971, was recognised as the Raising Day of the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) as thus the Kilo Flight was deemed to be the first BAF Unit.

Meanwhile, the Mi-4s were an ageing fleet, and by November 1971, IAF had contracted the Soviet Union to source the turbine-

20. Jagan and Chopra, n. 14, p. 292.

21. Based upon Interview of Air Cmde Singla and documents made available by him and the transcript of AVM Chandan Singh’s interview to Colonel Pyare Lal of USI. Made available by Major Chandrakant Singh of No. 4 Para who actually took part in the operations with IV Corps.

engine Mi-8 helicopters. A number of experienced aircrew drawn from various units had undergone conversion in Russia. The Mi-8s were, however, actually inducted only after the war. The trained Mi-8 crew did not take part in the war.

On December 1, 1971, the "Kilo Flight" received the twin tasks of attacking the fuel dumps at Chittagong and Narayanganj. The Alouette III was positioned at Kailashahar, and the mission was flown by Sqn Ldr Sultan and Flt Lt Alam with the fuel storage tanks at Narayanganj as targets. The mission was airborne at 0100 hours on December 4, 1971.

Unknown to them, war had been declared by Pakistan on December 3, 1971, with a pre-emptive strike against 11 Indian airfields in the Western theatre. The units executed their respective op-instructions, and three Mi-4s arrived at the IV Corps Headquarters at Teliamura, Agartala.

THE OPENING BATTLE AND MI-4S²²

As covered earlier, the battle for the control of Akhaura town commenced on December 1, 1971, and intense fighting continued for five days. The battle for Akhaura was an important one as Agartala airfield was well within Pak artillery range, restricting its use for aircraft operations.

Thus, three Mi-4s of 110 HU had arrived at Teliamura (IV Corps HQ) once war had been officially declared on December 3, 1971. One of these was utilised by Gen Sagat to undertake extensive aerial recce of the battlefield. The other two Mi-4s were used in a CASEVAC role. The need for additional helicopter support was recognised.

On December 4, 1971, two more Mi-4 helicopters were sent to Teliamura. Thus, a total of five Mi-4s were available thereafter.

On December 5, 1971, they airlifted 42 casualties from the battlefield.

Between December 1 and 5, 1971, a costly battle had been fought at Akhaura, which had resulted in the capture of the bridge over Titus river and resulted in the way to Brahmanbaria open. However,

22. Randhir Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh* (New Delhi: Vij Books India Pvt. Limited, 2013) and transcript of Lt Gen Sagat's interview to Col Pyare Lal of USI.

Sylhet was an important Pakistani stronghold and forces there could threaten the advance towards Dhaka, as envisaged by the GOC IV Corps. He decided to task the Mi-4s with an unplanned task of engaging the enemy at its stronghold. The SHBO with Sylhet as a target was planned. He enlisted the support of Gp Capt Chandan Singh. Even though Gp Capt Chandan Singh did not require any battlefield inoculation, he was entrusted with a unique task by the GOC.

The First Special Heli-borne Operation (SHBO): Sylhet²³



By December 6, 1971. However, the PAF threat in the Eastern sector had been completely neutralised by the IAF. On the morning of December 6, 1971, Gp Capt Chandan Singh—who was operating

23. Compiled from transcript of AVM Chandan Singh’s interview to Colonel Pyare Lal of USI and Personal Interview of Gp Capt RV Singh, who was the Flt Cdr of 105 HU Contingent during the operation, and inputs from F-1500 reports available at Ministry of Defence, GoI, History Division.

from Kailashahar with the Kilo Flight contingent—received a call from General Sagat Singh. The latter instructed him to fly to Sylhet town and accept the “instrument” of surrender. At almost the same time, the General asked his bewildered staff to prepare for an SHBO task to be undertaken by the Eighth Mountain Division on December 7, 1971.

Accordingly, on December 7, Gp Capt Chandan proceeded to Sylhet in a Chetak to accept the “surrender”, as all the Mi-4 helicopters were also asked to be assembled at Kailashahar. It was only later that it was decided to undertake the SHBO from a safe location as close as possible from Sylhet. The launch point was selected to be Kalaura.

As Gp Capt Chandan Singh approached for landing at Sylhet in the Kilo Flight Chetak after carrying out two orbits, looking for any White flag, he was fired upon. He states:

... against my instincts I decided to land this little Alouette helicopter; I was about to touch down when I heard the rat-a-tat of machine gunfire from all directions.... I came upon collective & got away on a very low level hugging the trees till outside their range of fire ...

Having had a narrow escape, he landed at Shamshernagar and drove to Div HQ. He found Gen Sagat Singh there, and he admits being upset as he remonstrated:

... I had gone there, and there was no reception and that my aircraft had literally been perforated by bullets ...

As described by Gp Capt Chandan Singh, Gen Sagat, without batting an eyelid, said:

... well, if that is the case, then we must now launch a heliborne operation against Sylhet ...

Gp Capt Chandan Singh was tasked to take charge of the operation. A battalion was to be inducted into Sylhet using helicopters.

The reconnaissance for the selection of the site was to be undertaken by him along with Brig CA Quinn “Bunty” from Kalaura.

On reaching Kalaura, he found the battalion selected was 4/5 GR which had been severely mauled in the battle of Gazipur and all its officers were casualties. The operation was to commence at 1200 hrs and complete by sunset.

More importantly, the troops had never seen a helicopter. As recalled by Gp Capt Chandan Singh, the helicopter crew and the helicopters (he had no idea to which unit they belonged to) were raring to go with Sqn Ldr Sandhu, Flt Lt Vaid and Flt Lt T Jayaraman as some of the names he remembers.

The landing site was selected between Surma river and Sylhet town, around half a kilometre from a vital rail and road bridge. From 1130 hrs on December 7, 1971, onwards, five helicopters were ready at Kalaura. However, by 1500 hrs, there was no sign of the troops. It was 1600 hrs when the first wave was launched.

The five Mi-4s with the now Taskforce Commander Gp Capt Chandan Singh faced no opposition as they dropped the first set of troops. During the second wave, they encountered machine-gun fire, with one aircraft becoming unserviceable on the Drop Zone (DZ) as it had been hit. Its leaking fuel tank was patch repaired and was recovered. By the time the aircraft returned after the third wave, it was dark.

The last wave was provided with an air cover by the Kilo Flight helicopter. According to Air Cmde Singla, they had fired several rockets, and possibly this was the reason that there was no enemy opposition or fire faced by the helicopters during the third wave. But, on returning to Kailashahar, Air Cmde Singla did express his apprehension that fratricide was a real possibility wherein it was virtually impossible to make out friend from foe during the daytime, let alone at night.

As the possibility of conducting night SHBO was not considered feasible, the helicopters returned to Kailashahar from Kalaura and were thoroughly checked for damages and field repairs were carried out. Meanwhile, the situation at Sylhet had turned grim as only approximately 150 troops had been inducted. As the Army pressed, and rightly so, for more sorties during the night, at 2000 hrs on December 7, 1971, the aircrew gathered around and discussed the possibility of the hitherto unthinkable task of induction of assault troops by night. The crew now included that of additional helicopters having been inducted by evening.

This was when it was discovered that of the available pilots, only three were night qualified. Immediately, the three night-qualified pilots trained four other pilots in night flying. By 2300 hrs they had seven pilots trained. But helipad lighting at both Kalaura and Sylhet DZ was still an issue.

It was decided that lighting up the hay of paddy fields at Kalaura wouldn't be difficult; however, a unidirectional glim lamp would be required at Sylhet DZ. To manage the DZ requirements, the services of Fg Offr SC Sharma, a Navigator from the Dakota element stationed at Kailashahar, were requisitioned.²⁴

Fg Off SC Sharma was inducted by the first of the six aircraft. During the course of the night (December 7/8), the SHBO continued. At 0300 hrs, one helicopter was hit on the DZ and was grounded while one had to force-land en route during the night.

The Operational Record book of 110 HU states that on December 7, its aircraft carried out 22 sorties of 3 shuttles inducting 254 troops and 400 kg of ammunition, and two helicopters were damaged by ground fire. The helicopters from 105 HU had carried 75 troops and 800 kg of load.

The damaged helicopters were recovered in daylight hours on December 8. However, the SHBO continued during the day (December 8), and both Battalions were flown in, and the bridge over the Surma river was secured. The strength of the helicopters had also built up to ten.

The figures for December 8 stood as follows:²⁵

Date	Unit	Sorties	Troops	Load (kg)
December 7	110HU	22 (each 3 Shuttles)	254	400
	105HU		75	800
December 8	110HU Night	14	184	300
	110HU Day		95	9,400
	105HU		139	5,500
Total:			747	16,400

24. Air Cmde RM Sridharan (Retd.), "Op Cactus Lily: The World's First Night Heli-Borne Drop at Sylhet", July 27, 2020, at <https://missionvictoryindia.com/op-cactus-lily-the-bangladesh-war-1971-worlds-first-night-heli-borne-drop-at-sylhet/>. Accessed on March 23, 2021.

25. Ministry of Defence, GoI, History Division, F-1500 Records—105 and 110 HU.

Gp Capt Chandan Singh describes the impact of this operation as:

... it opened up the eyes of the Army & Air (force) commanders that here was the answer to their problems in Bangladesh. The countryside of Bangladesh was full of natural obstacles ... these could only be crossed by heli assault/bridge ...

A COSTLY MISCALCULATION AND ROLE OF AIR STRIKES

On the other hand, the Pakistanis miscalculated the amount of force that had been inducted into Sylhet. It is possible that their calculations were based upon the carrying capacity of the Mi-8s, as Pak Army had never operated the Mi-4. Mi-8s could carry more than twice the load of the Mi-4.

The stand-in FAC, Fg Offr SC Sharma, had performed exceptionally well, and besides calling in the airstrikes by IAF fighters, he also coordinated supply drops by the fixed-wing aircraft.

This SHBO also stumped the enemy as the “obstacle course” constructed by him for Sylhet’s defence was overcome. But, even more significantly, it forced the enemy to take certain vital decisions, which proved to be their undoing. One such decision was the one that instructed the Pakistani troops located at the fortifications at Maulvi Bazaar to vacate and move north to relieve Sylhet.

The way to Dacca was open, and General Sagat was not about to let go of this opportunity. On December 9, he ordered the helicopters to relocate to Agartala and be ready. The Mi-4 and its crew responded, and the rest is history as the actual resistance encountered during the heli-bridging operations, including the crossing of the mighty Meghna river, was minimal. With the locals assisting actively, Dacca was threatened, and the military aim of General Niazi now turned to that of survival of his remaining troops, resulting in the surrender.

THE “BOLD & INTELLIGENT” USE OF HELICOPTERS

The then IAF chief, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, subsequently admitted said that during the planning phase, they did not envisage

“taking Dhaka”, and the result was an “unforeseen success”.²⁶ A fact corroborated by Lt Gen JFR Jacob—who was the Chief of Staff of Eastern Command of the Indian Army (IA) which was being commanded by Lt Gen JS Aurora—who has also indicated that, in August 1971, the objectives given to Eastern Command were Khulna and Chittagong by bypassing fortified areas and towns.²⁷ They were relying on the vertical envelopment using the fixed-wing aircraft, which took place on December 11, 1971, at Tangail.²⁸ However, by this time, the IV Corps troops were well and truly on their way to Dacca and reached just a few hours behind the forces, which were airdropped at Tangail.

The then Air Chief also significantly observes:²⁹

In the East, the Army’s 4 Corps, led by Lt. Gen. Sagat Singh, became a highly mobile strike force, the activities of which spread from Sylhet down to Feni and beyond ... The mobility of 4 Corps was very largely due to its **intelligent and bold use of helicopters** ...

SYLHET SHBO: PATHFINDER TO VICTORY

What needs to be remembered is that the “... *intelligent and bold use of helicopters* ...” was initiated with the Sylhet SHBO. The fighting at Sylhet was intense and continued till December 15, 1971.³⁰ This operation truly derailed the Pakistani plans, determined the subsequent actions by the Indian forces, and entailed a revision of the overall aim—a comprehensive victory and liberation of Bangladesh. A maximum of ten helicopters undertook the entire Sylhet operation.

26. Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 177.

27. Lt Gen JFR Jacob, “Niazi Bested”, in Maj Gen Dhruv C. Katoch and Lt Col Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir (eds.), *Liberation Bangladesh 1971, First-hand, untold, action stories from the war zone* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 232.

28. ADU, “Tangail Airdrop Landmark Operation 1971 Indo-Pak War”, at <https://www.aviation-defence-universe.com/tangail-airdrop-landmark-operation-1971-indo-pak-war/>. Accessed on March 21, 2021.

29. Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 178.

30. Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, “The Battle for Sylhet”, *Scholar Warrior*, Spring 2020, March 26, 2020, at <https://www.claws.in/publication/the-battle-for-sylhet/>. Accessed on March 22, 2021.

Fewer than 800 troops had boxed in the enemy at Sylhet. The significance of the battle is also indicated by the fact that at the time of surrender on December 16, 1971, at Sylhet, 109 Officers/109 JCOs and 6,124 ORs, including three Brigadiers, had surrendered.



Even though the largest of the airlifts was undertaken across the river Meghna subsequently, the outcome of the battle of Sylhet led by the 4th Battalion of 5th Gorkha Rifles aided by the Day and Night SHBO operation by the Mi-4s and supported by the armed Alouette III was the foundation upon which the path to victory was built. Recognising the contribution of the Mi-4, the 4/5 Gorkha Rifles unveiled the Sylhet trophy in 1983.

Hence, while the BAF pilots had flown the Alouette III, the Mi-4s had significantly contributed to the win. This is the bridge which connects the BAF and IAF and must be remembered and the relationship nurtured.