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Indian Air Power on Rajpath

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Image Source: ANI (Ministry of Defence)



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The year 2022 is technically the year of various milestones. It is the 75th year of independence, the 50th year of liberation of Bangladesh, the merger of the eternal flame at the National War Memorial and the 90th year of the Air Force in India. Incidentally, the Republic Day Parade this year witnessed the might of all these in some form. The Republic Day parade is always keenly awaited for seeing the mighty strength of the country's military. The earth digging march past on the tunes of rhythmic military bands instills a sense of nationalism, patriotism and enthusiasm in millions of hearts. However, nothing can beat the much-awaited flypast by the aircraft of the Indian Air Force. The culmination of the flypast with high 'g' Vertical Charlie manoeuvre is always a heartbeat skipping thrill and has motivated innumerable youngsters to join the armed forces and serve the nation. This time the recently inducted Rafale aircraft will carry out thrilling manoeuvres.

Air Power of the Nation

The 73rd Republic Day parade was commemorated with the largest, grandest, and mightiest fly past ever with 75 aircraft showcasing the airpower capability of the nation. On this occasion, other constituents of airpower i.e. the Indian Navy and the Indian Army, also joined in contributing to the overall might of airpower. Vintage and current modern aircraft like Rafale, Sukhoi, Jaguar, Mi-17V5, Sarang, Apache and Dakota displayed various formations.¹ Indian Navy's MiG-29K and the P-8i surveillance aircraft flew in the Varuna formation showcasing the presence of maritime airpower on the Rajpath. The highlight of the flypast was the Tangail formation by vintage Dakota aircraft along with two Dornier 228 aircraft and Meghna formation by CH-47F Chinook helicopter and four Mi-171V depicting the turning point events of the 14-day war of 1971, the historic Tangail airdrop of paratroopers by Dakota aircraft and the Heli bridging over Meghna river by M-4 helicopter respectively. It brought back the memories of the 1971 war, showcasing the might of airpower roaring over the Rajpath. The decisive blow to the enemy's will in the 1971 war was bombing the Government House at Dhaka, which was also showcased through the tableau depicting MiG-21 aircraft firing rockets over the target.² Seventeen Jaguar fighter aircraft flying in the figure of '75' with a picturesque view from the cockpit view cameras to celebrate Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav reminded us of the milestone we all live through.

Fig 1: IAF Tableau at RD Parade 2022

Source: Republic world³

Air Power during 1971 Indo-Pak War

It is relevant to recall these turning points to revisit how Air Power orchestrated the military might of the nation towards meeting the sole objective of the liberation of Bangladesh and forcing the surrender of 93000 Pakistani soldiers, the highest ever in military history the world over.

Operation Meghna. During the war, the retreating Pakistani soldiers had destroyed the bridges on the Meghna River. So, the IAF created a Heli bridge by M-4 helicopters troops crossing the riverine and marshy areas from Brahmanbaria to Raipura in Narsingdi over the Meghna river, bypassing the destroyed Meghna Bridge and Pakistani defences in Ashuganj without a single accident or loss to enemy fire. This Heli bridging was a masterstroke that led to the concentration of forces towards its final objective of Dhaka.

Sqn Ldr Pushp Vaid VrC, the Flt Cdr of helicopter unit recalls the daring Heli bridging operation as “The Meghna operation was about a few helicopters, pilots and technical personnel of IAF, who rose to the occasion to help the soldiers of IV Corps of Indian Army, with embedded Mitro Bahini, to leap over the riverine and marshy areas quickly in four Special Heli Borne Operations (SHBO), with no precedent or doctrine, learning on the run. In my view, the helicopter operation shortened the war and contributed to the quick victory, thus saving lives and the agony of long war”.⁴

The exemplary conduct of Meghna operation did a massive tactical airlift and augmentation of 6000 plus soldiers, nearly 202 plus tons of miscellaneous equipment, small arms ammo, water, kerosene, rations and Artillery with its heavy ammo, right into the battlefields, even across the mighty (over 5 km wide) Meghna river, nonstop, day and night, as well as evacuated hundreds of casualties of both friend and foe on the return leg.⁵ The helicopters of IAF maintained the pace of advance of ground troops throughout keeping the best operational values of the service.

Fig 2: SHBO in 1971 War



Source: Indian Defence Review⁶

Tangail Airdrop. The Tangail airdrop was one of the most successful and the biggest airborne operation by the rugged and reliable Dakota aircraft of the Indian Air Force. On 11 December 1971, around 750 para commandos of the Indian Army's Parachute Regiment were para dropped at the general location of Tangail town 70 km north of Dhaka. They were tasked to capture Poongli Bridge on the Jamuna River which would cut off the Pakistani 93rd Brigade that was retreating from Mymensingh in the north to defend Dhaka.⁷

This paradrop was the Airborne assault intended to transport troops for immediate operations to achieve a considerable shock effect on the enemy and produce results out of proportion to their numerical strength and firepower. The daring day drop of the battalion was feasible because almost total 'control of the air' was achieved by the IAF⁸, and Pakistan air opposition was virtually negligible. The effective joint planning between the Army and Air Force resulted in a well-orchestrated airborne assault in its entirety. The well-knit integrated planning

helped execute a day drop with the help of 22 Dakota, 20 Packet and six An-12 transport aircraft of IAF. As a result, the paratroopers defeated a force that was three times numerically superior and shattered the will of the Pakistani army to defend Dhaka. The successful airborne assault led to the collapse of Dhaka's defences and a speedy end to the war.

Fig 3: Tangail Airdrop

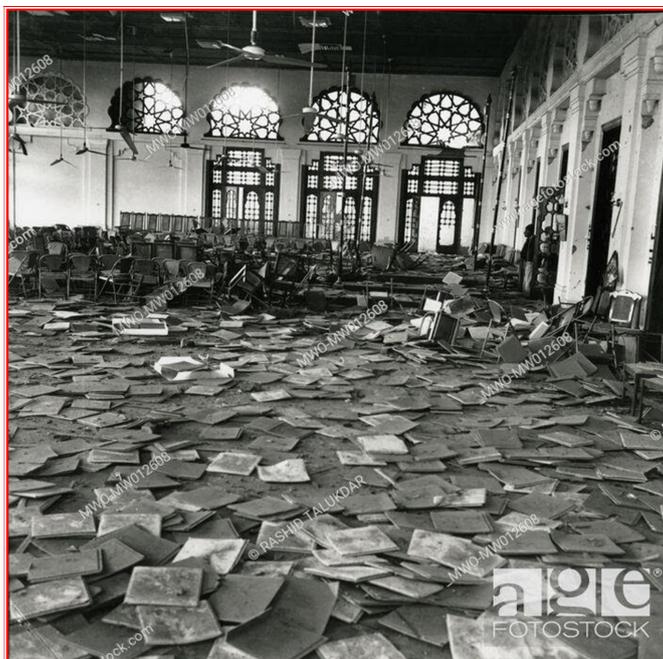


Source: Reddit.com⁹

Attack Over Governor's House. The Air Force played a pivotal role in the 14 days long war in East Pakistan. The Indian Army kept on achieving the objectives with its well-crafted manoeuvre warfare. But this would not have been feasible if the Air Force had not pressed its assets into the service. The Air Force met the prime objective of the liberation of Bangladesh, despite two fronts opened for it. The Vice Chief of Air Staff received accurate intelligence input from the head of the Intelligence agency. Interestingly, the IAF came to know about this meeting barely 45 minutes before the scheduled time.¹⁰ A go-ahead was given to the commander in the field to hit the enemy's Centres of Gravity (COG). The pilots were briefed on a hurriedly procured tourist map of Dhaka. As they were taxing out, new intelligence input pointed to the changed location of the conference venue to the Governor's House. Formation of four MiG 21 aircraft loaded with rockets got airborne and successfully identified the Governor's house showcasing the exceptional situational awareness of the aircrew and attacked the central leadership with pinpoint accuracy. It created such a strategic effect that the East Pakistani cabinet resigned even though around 93,000 troops were available for the defence of Dhaka.¹¹ The IAF played a crucial role in achieving the war objectives, which prevented a significant loss of territory in the desert sector in the western

front and ensured total command of air in the eastern front. IAF carried out more than 4000 sorties and provided vital air cover to the rapidly advancing Indian Army.

Fig 4: Bombing over Government House at Dhaka



Source: agefotostock¹²

The landmark year of 2022 will get enshrined in history as significant in showcasing the Air Power of the nation. Exercise Vayu Shakti demonstrating the firepower potential of the IAF both in offensive and defensive capabilities to deal with contemporary threats of the modern battlefield is soon to follow in the near future These events always act as a morale booster for the military and the general public as it allows practical assessment of operational readiness of the service.¹³

NOTES

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