

# BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR: SPECIAL HELIBORNE OPERATIONS (SHBO)<sup>1</sup> IN THE EASTERN SECTOR

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## **OPERATION “JACKPOT”<sup>2</sup>**

The day was December 16, 1971, and a nation was on the verge of being liberated from the clutches of an oppressive regime; a regime which had scant regard for the rule of law and the dignity of a human being. The commander of the Pakistani troops in East Pakistan, Gen AK Niazi of the Pakistan Army had been forced to agree to the draft of the surrender document put forth by Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, General-Officer-Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) Eastern Command of the Indian Army. With a formal surrender ceremony planned at Dacca (now known as Dhaka), the “fourteen-day” war was, thus, expected to end, resulting in the birth of Bangladesh. The news of the surrender was received with much jubilation by the battle-weary personnel.

With fighting continuing in some pockets and the airfield at Dacca rendered unusable for fixed wing operations, helicopters were the only option available for the Indian top brass to reach Dacca. The necessary helicopter air effort was readily available at the Agartala airfield where Mi-4 and Alouette

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1. SHBO: A Special Heliborne Operation provides the necessary momentum to surprise the enemy and multiply the chances of success of the overall plan at the higher level.
2. From Log Book Entry of Air Cmde (then Flt Lt) MM Ali of December 16, 1971.

**The helicopter aircrew had been operating alongside the army and had been in the thick of the battle since the beginning of the hostilities. The then Indian Air Force (IAF) Chief, Air Chief Mshl PC Lal subsequently admitted that during the planning phase, they did not envisage “taking Dhaka” and the result was actually an “unforeseen success”.**

(Chetak) helicopters were based.

The task of carrying the army and air force top brass to Dacca was code-named “Operation Jackpot” by the enthusiastic helicopter aircrew. The “two-star” and “three-star” (army, navy and air force) generals were to be flown in the Alouettes and the rest in the accompanying Mi-4s.<sup>3</sup>

The excitement was understandable. The helicopter aircrew had been operating alongside the army and had been in the thick of the battle since the beginning of the hostilities. The then

Indian Air Force (IAF) Chief, Air Chief Mshl PC Lal subsequently admitted that during the planning phase, they did not envisage “taking Dhaka” and the result was actually an “unforeseen success”.<sup>4</sup>

This fact has been corroborated by, the Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command Lt. Gen. JFR Jacob who was privy to the fact that in August 1971, the objectives given to Eastern Command were Khulna and Chittagong, bypassing the fortified areas and towns.<sup>5</sup>

The air chief further observes:<sup>6</sup>

In the East, the Army’s IV 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 IV Corps was due very largely to its intelligent and bold use of helicopters.

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3. Air Cmde MM Ali, telephonic conversation, October 2019.

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

5. Lt Gen J F R 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.

6. Lal, n. 4, p. 178.

Therefore, helicopters have been acknowledged for their significant contribution to the overall outcome of the war. Lt. Gen. Sagat Singh, commanding IV Corps, had been tasked to engage the enemy east of the Meghna river, on a north-south axis. But, as the balloon went up, he recognised the opportunity and exploited the helicopter as a part of his overall strategy to go for the big prize—Dacca. This audacious plan in which IAF helicopters played a crucial role could be executed largely aided by the total air superiority exercised by the IAF over East Pakistan since December 6, 1971. However, the direct involvement of the Indian armed forces and a declaration of war by Pakistan on December 3, 1971, was preceded by a desperate attempt by West Pakistan to subjugate dissent in its Bengali-speaking populace as a part an operation codenamed “Searchlight”.

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### **OPERATION SEARCHLIGHT AND THE PROPHECY**

This seminal moment in a series of events that eventually culminated in the birth of Bangladesh as a nation on December 16, 1971, was the unleashing of unbridled violence by those in power in what was known at then as East Pakistan, against their own Bangla-speaking populace. On the intervening night of March 25 and 26, 1971, Pakistan’s military dictator Gen Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan ordered its military to launch an operation codenamed “Searchlight”.<sup>7</sup> The primary aim of the operation was to subjugate the dissenting Bengali-speaking population which was protesting against the government’s refusal to accept the election results, which indicated a clear victory for the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujib-ur Rehman. The result was an unparalleled crackdown on the civil populace, best described as a “*selective genocide*” by Archer Blood, the United States’ consul general in Dacca.<sup>8</sup> The term genocide was used as, besides the dissenters, all

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7. Lt. Col. Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, “This is the Way my Boy”, in Katoch and Zahir, n. 5, p. 7.

8. Gary J Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India’s Secret War in East Pakistan* (Gurgaon: Random House India, 2013) p. xiii.

the Bengali Hindus were ordered to be killed, without exception. This is indicated by the fact that over 90 per cent of the refugees into India were Hindus, constituting 16 or 17 per cent of East Pakistan's population.<sup>9</sup> US President Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger stood by their Pakistani ally. This made the US a direct accomplice in the crime.<sup>10</sup> Henry Kissinger even flew to Beijing directly from Pakistan in June 1971.<sup>11</sup> This backing of the US made the dictator Yahya Khan supremely confident in stamping his authority through a ruthless crackdown. As a part of this crackdown, the Pakistani military had quarantined its own Bengali personnel and also grounded all its "Bengali" pilots.<sup>12</sup>

The resultant humanitarian disaster led to millions of refugees pouring into India. The prophesy of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad made before partition was proving right. In April 1946, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the then Congress president, in an interview to journalist Shorish Kashmiri for a Lahore-based Urdu magazine, *Chattan*, had predicted that a religious conflict in Pakistan would result in the eastern half carving out a future for itself. At that time, the Maulana had also predicted:<sup>13</sup>

West Pakistan will become the battleground of regional contradictions and disputes. The assertion of sub-national identities of Punjab, Sind, Frontier and Balochistan will open the doors for outside interference.

At the same time, India was grappling with the insurgency problem which was raising its head in both Nagaland and Mizoram. The insurgents were suspected to have been receiving substantial aid from East Pakistan.

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9. Ibid., p. 121.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., pp. 171-175.

12. S Sajjad Haider, *Flight of the Falcon* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Pvt. Ltd., 2009), p. 220.

13. Newage Islam.com, "Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: The Man Who Knew the Future of Pakistan Before its Creation", <http://www.newageislam.com/books-and-documents/maulana-abul-kalam-azad--the-man-who-knew-the-future-of-pakistan-before-its-creation/d/2139>. Accessed on October 24, 2018.

Internationally, India's pleas for help in tackling the refugee crisis that was a result of the genocide, did not receive much traction. The impending humanitarian crisis was conveniently ignored by the US, as it focussed on using Pakistan to open talks with the Chinese. Thus, India seemed to be running out of options.

### INDIA'S OPTIONS

India's repeated pleading at various fora around the world elicited very little or no response. In fact, as a key ally of Pakistan, the US was well aware that the weapons supplied by it—specifically the F-86 Sabre jets, M-24 Chaffee tanks, jeeps equipped with machine guns—were being used to target largely the innocent civil populace in East Pakistan, but found it expedient and even convenient to ignore the fact.

US President Richard Nixon and his Chief of Staff Henry Kissinger also shared an extremely warm and cordial relationship with the Pakistani dictator Gen Yahya Khan. The Indian leadership, Prime Minister (PM) Mrs Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, shared a diametrically opposite relationship with the Republican President Nixon as well as Kissinger.

Despite knowing that the US and China were tacitly backing Pakistan, India continued its diplomatic efforts. It was confronted with the grim reality of being isolated on the global stage wherein most countries toed the US line. Even the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries continued to advise India not to escalate the crisis and desist from interfering in the "internal" issue of Pakistan. The only token success achieved was the grant of some \$17.5 million aid from the US and four US Air Force C-130s for carrying supplies and ferrying approximately 23,000 refugees from Tripura to Assam for a month and not much else.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, emboldened, Pakistan continued to brutally oppress its own people. As per the then Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) Gen SHFJ Manekshaw, during a Cabinet meeting held on April 28, 1971, he was directed by the Indian PM to "*go in (east Pakistan) and take action*", even if it meant war. The

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14. Bass., n. 8, p. 143.

general, however, insisted that he be given adequate time for preparation and to choose the correct time in order to avoid a 1962 type fiasco and achieve guaranteed success.<sup>15</sup>

However, this meeting did set in to motion a set of calibrated and well thought out steps which could not conceal the distinct preparations being made for war.

The Indian PM was extremely confident of the preparations as she had overseen them throughout the summer months, from April to October. The armed forces had endured the summer months expecting, and preparing for, an attack on three fronts viz. west, north (China) and east. Armed confrontation was unavoidable—the only question was of the date of its declaration. The onset of winter in November had already been preceded by an “explosive summer” which was gradually turning the tide in India’s favour.

### THE EXPLOSIVE SUMMER

The anger of the Bengali refugees was channelised by creating the “Mukti Bahini”. Mr K F Rustamji who was leading the Border Security Force (BSF) was authorised as early as March 29, 1971, to extend help to the Bengali refugees willing to fight back.<sup>16</sup>

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 place inside East Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Earlier, as the Pakistan Army crackdown started, 4 East Bengal (4EB) Battalion under Maj Khaled Mosharraf (Comilla and Brahmanbaria area) crossed over into south Tripura. Similarly, 2EB Battalion under Maj KM Shafiullah managed to extricate itself and established itself at “Telipara” in Sylhet district near north Tripura.<sup>18</sup> By April “Teliapara” had become a hub of the resistance movement. On April 4, 1971, it was also the place where the command of

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15. Youtube.com, “Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, Leadership Lecture: Moral and Physical Courage”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSvLFPFXjc8>. Accessed on October 6, 2018.

16. Bass, n. 8, p. 95.

17. Ibid., p. 96

18. Maj Gen Ashok Kalyan Verma, *Bridge on River Meghna: The Dash to Dhaka* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2009), p. 5.

the “Liberation War” was handed over to Col MAG Osmany, who was the seniormost Bengali infantry officer. He was nominated as the Mukti Bahini’s commander-in-chief. Simultaneously, the resistance decided to set up a government-in-exile, resulting in the April 17 proclamation.

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 East Pakistan Rifles. The problems for Pakistan had been compounded by India having blocked civil/military aircraft overflights over India after the hijack of the Indian Airlines flight from Srinagar to Jammu on January 30, 1970.<sup>19</sup> The Pakistani build-up, thus, took time and had to be routed via Sri Lanka. Heavy equipment took even longer and had to be transported by ship. The Pakistani build-up continued even onboard the aircraft which were supposed to evacuate foreigners from Dhaka.

The skirmishes between the opposing army formations began to increase and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) was using the F-86E, armed with the GAR-8 missiles, in support of its army, launching close to 100 missions by November 19, 1971. The Indian involvement continued to increase, especially in the poorly demarcated border areas and two F-86E Sabre jets were also shot down by the IAF Gnats on November 22, 1971.<sup>20</sup> The undeclared war for the liberation of Bangladesh was, however, already unofficially underway, led by the Bengalis themselves. But the Indian military was well aware of the magnitude of the task and the risks involved.

### THE INDIAN MILITARY AIM

After the April 28, 1971, Cabinet meeting, the COAS Gen SHFJ Manekshaw specified the war aims for formulating the respective campaign plans by the three arms of the defence forces. As per the then IAF Chief, Air Chief Mshl PC Lal, these were:<sup>21</sup>

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19. Dawn.com, February 3, 2012, “‘Ganga’ Hijacker Passes Away”, <https://www.dawn.com/news/692800>. Accessed October 24, 2018. The aircraft was subsequently set on fire and destroyed. Till the Indian action of stopping the overflights, no action was initiated against the hijackers.

20. Haider, n. 12 p. 235.

21. Lal, n. 4 p. 171.

**The growing Indian involvement was well recognised by Pakistan as a precursor to war. The PAF had requisitioned the aircraft of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and airlifted at least two additional infantry divisions (9 and 16) to East Pakistan via Sri Lanka to bolster the military presence almost six months before the formal declaration of war on December 3, 1971. During this strategic airlift, the C-130Bs of Iran and Turkey were also requisitioned.**

... 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 if it were for a possible state of Bangladesh. In the West, the objective was to hold the Pakistani forces.

This may well have been the case initially, however, as the activities of the Mukti Bahini as well as the aspirations of the Bengali populace evolved, it was clear that nothing short of complete independence would suffice.

#### **THE PAK GAME PLAN**

The growing Indian involvement was well recognised by Pakistan as a precursor to war. The PAF had requisitioned the aircraft of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and airlifted at least two<sup>22</sup> additional infantry divisions (9 and 16) to East Pakistan via Sri Lanka to bolster the military presence almost six months before the formal declaration of war on December 3, 1971. During this strategic airlift, the C-130Bs of Iran and Turkey were also requisitioned.

Lt. Gen. Niazi was in charge of the Eastern Command of the Pakistan Army as well as the martial law administrator and was responsible for law and order. Maj Gen Rao Farman Ali was the military adviser on civil-political affairs to the Governor of East Pakistan Dr. AM Malik, and was looking after the civil secretariat.

The aim of Gen Niazi was to defend the entire territory of East Pakistan—he was aware of the intentions of the Bengalis to create an independent nation.

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22. Haider, n. 12 p. 234.



His force deployment reflected this strategy and he continued to follow and execute the policy commenced on the fateful night of March 25/26 i.e. of putting down the rebellion forcefully. Simultaneously, achieving a sort of ethnic cleansing in the process. The guerrilla tactics of the Mukti Bahini continued to invite a strong response in which the PAF also took an active part.

Thus, Gen Niazi spelt out the task to be: 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.

The fortresses referred to the strong defensive positions<sup>23</sup> constructed as a part of “*forward defensive posture*” at major towns. Strong defensive positions were constructed at Bogra, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Jessore, Jhenid, Sylhet, Kamalpur, Bhairab Bazaar, Comilla, Chittagong and Dacca. Due to the peculiarity of the terrain, these could not be mutually supportive and there were no reserves retained other than some at Dacca. The instructions for the formation on the front were clear and specified that withdrawal would not take place to the fortresses till such time the concerned unit had suffered 75 per cent casualties.<sup>24</sup>

The plan was conventional in nature and was based on prolonging the war till such time either a ceasefire was brought about due to international pressure, or decisive success was achieved in the western sector.

The air cover was also woefully inadequate and consisted of a mix of fighters, transporter and helicopters. No 14 Squadron, operating from Tejgaon,

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23. Col Khalid M. Zaki, *Through The Lens Of Operational Art: 1971 Bangladesh Campaign*, A Monograph, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/bf46/cb947f0794639243c1e1dfe2e3d13ab18594.pdf>. Accessed on August 10, 2019.

24. Ibid.

was equipped with Canadair F-86 Sabre fighters which were estimated to be totalling 16 in number, along with two Lockheed T-33 “shooting star” jet trainers. Two Alouette IIIs were also stationed, along with No 14 Squadron, in a rescue role. At the commencement of hostilities, a couple of DHC-4 Twin Otters (PAF) and four DHC-2 Beavers [Pakistan Army Aviation (PAA)] comprised the available PAF transport air element.

In addition, the PAA also operated five of the latest Russian MI-8 twin engine (turbine) helicopters and four Alouette IIIs for communication and logistic support duties. The army even tried to construct an airport at Syedpur in preference to Lalmonirhat and Thakurgaon, using the Bengalis as “forced labour” working without wages.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of available air effort was sought to be made up with an effective Air Defence (AD) plan consisting of a well camouflaged radar (AR-1) and Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA). Once the hostilities began, it was known that the sole runway was likely to be disabled within 48 hours and, thus, during this period, the plan was to use the Sabres as a bait to entrap and lure Indian aircraft into the designated AAA kill zones. This was supplemented by aircraft dispersal plans, along with Camouflage, Concealment and Deception (CCD) measures. These included the use of mock-ups also.<sup>26</sup>

## THE INDIAN PLAN

On August 16, 1971, Army Headquarters (HQ) issued Operational Instruction No 53 which specified the tasks of the Indian Army as:<sup>27</sup>

- 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 Est Bengal including the entry ports of Chittagong and Khulna.

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25. Lt. Col. Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, “Forced Labour and Sayedpur Airport Construction”, in Katoch and Zahir, eds, n. 5, p. 54.

26. PVS Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *The Indian Air Force in the 1971 Liberation War: Eagles Over Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), p. 368.

27. SN Prasad and UP Thapliyal, *The India -Pakistan War of 1971-A History* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers for Ministry of Defence, Government. of India, 2014), pp. 274-275.

As the situation evolved, so did the Indian military response to the events led by Eastern Command. With the winter setting in and the monsoons threat receding, the threat in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and Sikkim of Chinese aggression kept reducing. The IAF had set up an Advance HQ alongside the Army Eastern Command and was responsible for close air support to the army.

The air support available with the army comprised of 659 Air Observation Post (AOP) Squadron and consisted of five flights (Nos. 4, 6, 10 11 and 16 AOP Flight), each operating three aircraft. Of these 4 and 6 AOP operated the Krishaks and 10, 11 and 16 operated the Alouettes.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, a total of 9 Chetak Army Aviation helicopters (max) was available.

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

The Indian Air Force, on its part, had the following tasks entrusted to it<sup>29</sup>:

- 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.

The committed air effort consisted of a mix of Hunter F56 and T66, Gnat, SU-7, and MiG-21. Totalling over 160, these were to operate from Kalaikunda, Dum Dum, Panagarh, Bagdogra, Hashimara, Gauhati, Tezpur and Kumbhirgram airfields. The Canberra aircraft of No 16 Squadron, based at Gorakhpur, were operating from Gorakhpur itself. The transport aircraft support was provided by the C-47 Dakotas, DHC-3 Otters, DHC-4 Caribous, Antonov-12s, and C-119 "Packets" operating from Barrackpore, Jorhat, Chabua, Gauhati, Bareilly and Allahabad.

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28. Jagan and Chopra, n. 26.

29. Ibid., p. 353.

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). Amidst this detailed planning that was being carried out, the nucleus of the Bangladesh Air Force was also in the process of being established in the form of the “Kilo Force” at Dimapur.

### THE KILO FORCE<sup>30</sup>

On September 26, 1971, Flt Lt (later Air Cmde) Chandra Mohan M Singla was summoned by his Commanding Officer (CO) Sqn Ldr Naresh Kumar of 112 HU (flying the Alouettes) located at Bagdogra. A Qualified Flying Instructor (QFI) on this type of aircraft, he was told by his CO to pack his bags for “*four or five weeks*”. Specific instructions included the necessity for him to carry his own bedding. Earlier, Gp Capt (later Air Mshl) Chandan Singh, the station commander, Jorhat, had been called by the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) Eastern Air Command Air Mshl Dewan and given the task of resurrecting the Bangladesh Air Force and taking charge of 100 Bangladeshi airmen and 12 officers, mostly pilots.

Flt Lt Singla reached Dimapur, flying a Chetak solo from Tezpur. Later, Gp Capt Chandan Singh landed in a Dakota with a hand-picked maintenance team. The task was then spelt out by Gp Capt Chandan Singh, which 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 the PAF, Capt Shahabuddin Ahmed was a civilian pilot. Much later, this date i.e. September 28, 1971, was also recognised as the Raising Day of the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF).

Devising own syllabus and without any break, Flt Lt Singla taught them flying till the three were comfortable in handling the helicopter, by both day and night.

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

**Fig 1: Kilo Flight Modified Chetak**



Source and permission: PVS Jagan and Air Cmde Singla.

Thereafter, on October 8, 1971, a Chetak (serial No 364) was flown to Jorhat in a transport aircraft. It was fitted on either side with rocket pods which carried seven rockets each. These were sourced from the Mystere IV aircraft, which were in the process of being phased out. They were capable of firing rockets in pairs or in salvo mode and the switches for selection and firing were mounted on the “cyclic” stick (control column) of the captain. A firing sight was also fitted. In addition, a side-firing twin-barrel machine gun was also mounted on the floor behind the seats. This was flown to Jorhat by both Flt Lt Singla and Gp Capt Chandan Singh. The “Kilo Flight” operation was a top-secret one, the details of which could not be leaked out.

Preparations were also underway at the rest of the helicopter units under the Eastern Air Command (EAC). Negotiations were underway with the Soviet Union to source the Mi-8 helicopters. The delivery of the Mi-8s was tried to be hastened up but they were actually inducted only after the war. The experienced crew drawn from various units had undergone conversion in Russia on the Mi-8s and had returned to their respective units. These were experienced pilots who had a fair bit of experience on the Mi-4s that

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the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Mizo hills for over two and a half years. He had been in charge of the counter-insurgency operations in the Mizo hills. The operations against the insurgents or “hostiles”—as he termed them—had resulted in their shifting base from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the then East Pakistan. As the month of October set in, the threat from China continued to recede and he redeployed the troops and chalked out his campaign strategy.

The air support was inadequate as the IAF fighters operating from Kumbhirgram and Guwahati could not cover areas south of the Comilla-Dacca line. Also, at its extreme ranges, the MiG-21 could use only its front guns. Aircraft could not operate from Agartala airfield as it was within artillery and mortar range of the enemy which was well entrenched at Akhaura, besides the runway length was inadequate for most aircraft. The information available about the enemy fortifications was extremely limited, as was the information about the lay of land.

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were available in both 105 and 110 HU. However, it was decided that these pilots would not be flying the Mi-4s which were to take part in expected war-time operations. The helicopters were planned to be deployed to support of IV Corps which was commanded by than Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Sagat Singh.

#### **GEN SAGAT SINGH’S IV CORPS AND THE HELICOPTER REQUIREMENT<sup>31</sup>**

At the commencement of the war, Maj Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Sagat Singh had been

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31. 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. Source: Maj Chandrakant Singh.

biggest river of the present-day Bangladesh, the Meghna, which, along most of its course, is 4,000 yards wide and provided one of the best natural defences for Dacca.

Gen Sagat Singh was also aware that in his area boats comprised the main mode of communication: the L-60 anti-aircraft guns had been mounted on these boats by the Pakistani forces for use in a dual role against both ground and aerial targets.

Gen Sagat was also well aware of the capabilities of the helicopter as a platform to be used in an offensive role. He had commanded the 50 Para Brigade in Agra and subsequently had used helicopters extensively while tackling the “hostiles” in the Mizo hills.

During the build-up, he was aware of the use of Mi-8 helicopters by the Pakistan Army against the rebellious unit of 4 East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) which had occupied the Belonia Bulge for three to four weeks. A company of the elite Special Services Group (SSG) was dropped behind the 4 EPR battalion, effectively blocking its retreat. A similar *modus operandi* was also used between April 10-14, 1971, to effectively rout the elements of 2 and 4 EBR which had captured the Meghna bridge at Ashuganj.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, he requested that a helicopter “squadron” be made available to him; the reason, he states, was: ... for normal casualty evacuation and to have the capability to switch troops from one location to another should a threat develop.... I also had in mind that I could possibly use helicopters in the offensive task....

According to Gen Sagat, his proposal for using the helicopters in an offensive role was discussed between the Army and IAF HQ. Eventually, a directive was received by him which stated:

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32. Verma, n. 18, p. 26.

Air Force only had the capability of lifting one company and that I should submit plans for the helicopters to lift one company only and they asked my firm plans for the company that was to use the helicopter transport. I replied to say mobility and flexibility of the helicopter was a matter of opportunity and that I could not possibly give any firm plans in advance. In fact, it would be wrong to make firm plans and thereby not take full advantage of the characteristics of the heliborne operations.

Therefore, it is obvious that during the planning process, the helicopters were planned for a very limited role, similar to the nature of tasks which were already being undertaken for combating the insurgents. Therefore, helicopters to support IV Corps operations involved plans for providing company level airlift only.

However, a fateful and timely directive received by Gp Capt Chandan Singh to liaise with Gen Sagat Singh for tasking of the helicopter of the “Kilo Flight” had a profound effect on the future course of the IV Corps’ operations.

### **THE FATEFUL MEETING<sup>33</sup>**

On December 1, 1971, Gp Capt Chandan Singh had received a task from the AOC-in-C EAC, for which the “Kilo Flight” Chetaks and Otters were to be used. Since the war had not been officially declared, these were to be flown by Bangladeshi pilots. The fuel dumps at Chittagong and Narayanganj were to be attacked on the intervening night of December 2 and 3 itself. The operation was postponed by one night and the plan was for launch at 0100 hrs on the intervening night of December 3 and 4, 1971, under a “brilliant moon,” as described by Gp Capt Chandan Singh.

One of the reasons for the inability to launch on December 2/3 was the fact that Gp Capt Chandan Singh was asked to meet Gen Sagat Singh at Teliamura in the afternoon and discuss further tasking of the Kilo Flight. However, he could meet him only late in the night as Gen Sagat was out meeting his troops. Later, Gen Sagat had a heart-to-heart talk with Gp Capt

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33. n. 30.



Chandan Singh, and the bonding between the two was instantaneous. Gp Capt Chandan Singh describes the meeting as: ... it was quite an experience..He was full of energy, dynamism and go; he asked me as to what our little Bangladesh Air Force could do ... he asked me to target transport movement, lines of communication, machine gun concentrations, troops ... he wanted regular feedback on our doings...

Post the tete-a-tete, the Narayanganj and Chittagong night strike was mounted on December 4, 1971, at 0100 hours. The target was the fuel storage tanks at Narayanganj and the strike was successful in setting them ablaze. At that time, it was not known that Pakistan had already initiated the war on India by carrying out preemptive strikes against 11 airfields in the western theatre on December 3, 1971. Once this become known later that day, Flt Lt Singla was directed to be on board every mission.

Having moved back to Dimapur, they once again moved back to Kailashaher on December 6, 1971, and on the night of December 6, 1971, undertook three missions and engaged targets of opportunity in Kalaura, Maulvi Bazaar and Shamsher Nagar. By this time, the Mi-4s had already been operating since the declaration of war at Teliamura.

#### **THE BATTLE OF AKHAURA AND USE OF MI-4s<sup>34</sup>**

The vital battle for wresting control of the Akhaura town commenced at 1800 hrs on December 1, 1971. There was intense fighting over a period of five days i.e. between December 1-5, 1971. Three Mi-4s of 110 HU had arrived at Teliamura (IV Corps HQ) once the war had been officially declared on December 3, 1971. One of these was utilised by Gen Sagat to undertake extensive aerial reconnaissance of the battlefield. The other two Mi-4s were used in a Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC) role.

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34. Singh, n. 31 and Ministry of Defence F-1500 Records.

**Fig 2: Battle of Akhaura**



Source: Map has been adapted by the author, with permission, from the one that he received from Air Cmde RM Shridharan (Retd) as a part of his memoirs on October 23, 2018.

On December 4, 1971, two more Mi-4 helicopters were sent to Teliamura, thus, a total of five Mi-4s was available thereafter. On December 5, 1971, they airlifted 42 casualties from the battlefield.

A costly battle had been fought at Akahura between December 1 and 5, 1971, which resulted in the capture of the bridge over the Titus river, and opened the approach to Brahmanbaria town.

## **HELICOPTERS FOR SITUATIONAL AWARENESS AND BATTLE DAMAGE ASSESSMENT**

The corps commander had been using an AOP Chetak flown by Maj Sihota. On December 5, 1971, he made Maj Sihota fly over the scene of the battle at Akhaura and noticed the enemy withdrawing. Without wasting any time,

he made contact with the nearest grouping of Indian troops and directed them to press on, giving them the enemy dispositions.

Subsequently, this was the norm followed by the corps commander, whether he was flying in a Mi-4 or a Chetak. Three of the Chetaks from No. 115 HU had been inducted on December 7, 1971.<sup>35</sup> This helped him to maintain an extraordinary level of situational awareness.

The Chetak had become the platform of choice as it afforded a better degree of visibility compared to the Mi-4, in which one had to stand behind the pilot on a ladder in place of the flight engineer.

**The Pakistanis, on the other hand, probably miscalculated the numbers of the force which had been inducted into Sylhet. It is possible that their calculations were based upon the carrying capacity of the Mi-8s, as the Pakistan Army had only operated the Mi-4. The Mi-8s could carry more than twice the load of the Mi-4.**

#### **THE FIRST SPECIAL HELIBORNE OPERATION (SHBO): SYLHET<sup>36</sup>**

The battles fought till December 6, 1971, had been hard fought and had come at a great human cost. Gen Sagat at that time made sure his troops treated these casualty figures as a battlefield inoculation exercise and exhorted the men, officers and troops alike, to exploit the historic opportunity to avenge their dead and wounded.

By this time, the PAF had been completely neutralised by the IAF, and the corps commander had plans for the IAF helicopter element to get involved and also get battle inoculated.

On the morning of December 6, Maj Gen Sagat telephoned Gp Capt Chandan Singh—who had, by now, reached Kailashahar with the Kilo Force contingent—and told him that the enemy at Sylhet wanted to surrender and he should fly to Sylhet town and accept the “instrument” of surrender and bring it to him. He had also told Gp Capt Chandan Singh on December 5, in the presence of Maj

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35. GoI, MoD, History Division F-1500 Records 115 HU.

36. Singh, n. 31 pp. 191-202 and F-1500 Records of 110 HU.

Gen Krishna Rao, that more helicopters were in the process of being inducted and he wanted Gp Capt Chandan Singh to take charge of them as well.

He wanted Gp Capt Chandan Singh to now take charge of the operation to induct a battalion into Sylhet using the 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 where all its officers were casualties. The planned operation was to commence at 1200 hrs and be 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 led by Sqn Ldr Sandhu, were, however, raring to go.

**Fig 3: December 7-8, Sylhet**



Source: Map has been adapted by the author, with permission, from the one that he received from Air Cmde RM Shridharan (Retd) as a part of his memoirs on October 23, 2018.

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

The five Mi-4s, with the now task force 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 it 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 Force helicopter. According to Air Cmde Singla, they had fired a number of rockets and possibly this was the reason why there was no enemy opposition or fire faced by the helicopters during the third wave. But on returning to Kailashaher, Air Cmde Singla did express his apprehension that fratricide was a real possibility, because it was virtually impossible to distinguish friend from foe during day-time, let alone at night.

Subsequently, the helicopters, having returned to Kailashaher, were thoroughly checked for damage, and field repairs were carried out. At 2000 hrs on December 7, it was discovered that only three pilots 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 at the Sylhet Drop Zone (DZ) was still an issue that required to be addressed.

It was decided that lighting up the hay in the paddy fields at Kalaura would not be difficult. However, a unidirectional glim lamp would be required at the Sylhet DZ. In order to manage the DZ requirements, the services of Sqn Ldr Chaudhary, a navigator from the Dakota element stationed at Kailashaher were requisitioned. Fg Offr SC Sharma was inducted by the first of the six aircraft. During the course of the night (December 7/8), the Special Helicopterborne Operation (SHBO) continued. At 0300 hrs, one

helicopter was hit on the DZ and was grounded, while another 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 the daylight hours on December 8. However, the SHBO continued during the day (December 8) and two battalions were flown in, and the bridge over the Surma river was secured. The strength of the helicopters had also built up to 10.

Gp Capt Chandan Singh describes the impact of this operation:<sup>37</sup> ... it opened up the eyes of the army and 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.

The Pakistanis, on the other hand, probably miscalculated the numbers of the force which had been inducted into Sylhet. It is possible that their calculations were based upon the carrying capacity of the Mi-8s, as the Pakistan Army had only operated the Mi-4. The Mi-8s could carry more than twice the load of the Mi-4. This was the reason why at Sylhet, 109 Officers/109 Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and 6124 Other Ranks (ORs), including three brigadiers, had surrendered to a force a fraction of the size of their own.

The stand-in Forward Air Controller (FAC) Fg Offr SC Sharma had performed extremely well and besides calling in the air strikes, he also coordinated supply drops by the fixed wing aircraft. This helilift also stumped the enemy as the "obstacle course" constructed by him for the defence of Sylhet was overcome but, more importantly, it forced the enemy to take certain key decisions which proved to be its undoing. It vacated its fortifications at Maulvi Bazaar and moved north to relieve Sylhet and in the bargain left the way to Dacca open.

Gen Sagat was not about to let go of this opportunity. On December 9, he ordered the helicopters to relocate to Agartala and be ready.

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37. n.30.

**SHBO: BRAHMANBARIA TO RAIPURA<sup>38</sup>**

Gen Sagat describes December 9, 1971, as the most exciting day of his life.<sup>39</sup> Gp Capt Chandan Singh was briefed on the night of December 8 that the army had advanced over a broad front to the river Meghna, and helicopters were to be made ready to undertake operations across the mighty river as the bridge on the Meghna at Ashuganj -Behrabazaar had been demolished by the enemy.

**Fig 4: December 9-10, Brahmanbaria to Raipura**



Source: Map has been adapted by the author, with permission, from the one that he received from Air Cmde RM Shridharan (Retd) as a part of his memoirs on October 23, 2018.

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38. n. 30 and GoI MoD History Division F-1500 Records.

39. Singh, n. 31, p. 204.

**It is also significant that the Gnats had become operational from Agartala on December 8, 1971, onwards even though the runway was still being extended using PSP sheets. They provided the necessary close air support to the rapidly advancing Indian troops.**

On the morning of December 9, 1971, Gp Capt Chandan Singh and Gen Sagat undertook what Gp Capt Chandan calls an “armed recon” in a helicopter across the Meghna and selected a site near Raipura. Gp Capt Chandan Singh was now keen that since the site was close to enemy positions at Behrabazaar, they should start late in the day and continue throughout the night.

On December 9, Gen Sagat flew over Narsingdi town and saw Bangla flags being waved from the houses. After Narsingdi, as he was flying to Brahmanbaria and he thought there were no Pakistanis left on the eastern side of the river, he asked the captain to fly at around 1,500 ft. The Chetak was fired upon by a machine gun post and received 38 bullet hits. The co-pilot was hit three times and three bullets passed within 1.5 to 3 inches from Gen Sagat and one grazed his forehead. But the aircraft remained airworthy and the captain managed a landing at Agartala. But the general reached Brahmanbaria in another helicopter and showed Gen Gonzalves, Brig Mishra and Lt. Col Himmeth Singh where he wanted the SHBO to take place.

Short of Ashuganj, 18 Rajput and 10 Bihar had been pinned down by Pakistani troops led by Brig Sadaullah Khan and thereafter the retreating troops of the Pakistan Army had blown up the bridge at 1105 hrs on December 9, 1971. However, the Pakistan Army got involved in defending a damaged bridge at Ashuganj which made absolutely no tactical sense and, thus, the importance and criticality of the SHBO.

The plan of Gp Capt Chandan Singh to commence operations on the afternoon of December 9, 1971, also ensured that the faults and damages to the Mi-4s were rectified, and the necessary servicing was carried out. Having realised the importance of the operation, more helicopters had been requested for, and two helicopters from 111 HU had arrived to be a part of the helicopter task force.



It is also significant that the Gnats had become operational from Agartala on December 8, 1971, onwards even though the runway was still being extended using PSP sheets. They provided the necessary close air support to the rapidly advancing Indian troops.

The airlift commenced from Brahmanbaria to Raipura at 1400 hrs and by December 10, 1971, Chandpur had been occupied, cutting off all possibility of help reaching Dacca from Chittagong. A significant number of troops had been isolated at Sylhet. Most importantly, for the first time, the mighty Meghna was not looking all that mighty as an obstacle to the military advance.

By this time, the night operations had become a well-oiled exercise. The helipads were marked with *atta* (wheat flour—both wet and dry). The helipad edges were marked with dough and “H” marked with dry *atta*. Innovative solutions such as using suitably shielded torches to provide guidance to the approaching helicopters were thought of and implemented. Most importantly, with increased awareness levels, the site selection for the helicopters to land was meticulously carried out.

The local population was elated at the feeling of freedom and willingly helped the movement of the Indian Army, with the Mukti Bahini cadres now actively guiding the Indian troops. Gen Niazi’s plan had been effectively checkmated. But, more importantly, the tasking for the helicopters was about to become even more daunting.

#### **SHBO: BRAHMANBARIA TO NARSINGDI<sup>40</sup>**

Early on December 11, 1971, Gp Capt Chandan Singh was contacted by Gen Sagat. After congratulating him on the successful SHBO at Raipura, Gp

**The diminutive Mi-4s had added another dimension to the conventional battlefield. By introducing the elements of surprise, force concentration and flexibility in the planning process, they made sure that they will not be left out of the planning consideration for future conflicts.**

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40. n. 30 and GoI MoD History Division F-1500 Records.

Capt Chandan Singh recollects that the general, before specifying the task, told him: ... there was no time for rest and it was time to cross the mighty Meghna in a big way and get as close to Dacca as we could....

The task was to lift an entire brigade and an artillery regiment which entailed a flying effort of more than 150 sorties. Gp Capt Chandan Singh knew that each helicopter would have to undertake 14-15 sorties. The load configurations this time would also involve airlift of artillery guns. The serviceability of the helicopters was under strain. It is possible that it was at this time that he used all his influence with the EAC to allot additional aircraft and spares as, invariably, some of the ageing Mi-4s would have to be made flyworthy.

**Fig 5: December 11-13, Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi**



Source: Map has been adapted by the author, with permission, from the one that he received from Air Cmde RM Shridharan (Retd) as a part of his memoirs on October 23, 2018.

The assumption was simple: war was on and risks had to be taken , even if it meant violation of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The crew were accordingly briefed.

The selected DZ was a large flat ground three miles due southwest of Narsingdi, next to a road running to Dacca.

The task commenced on December 11, 1971, at around 1200 hrs and continued throughout the night. The Mi-4s were beginning to show signs of fatigue in striking contrast to the aircrew who had got infected with the general enthusiasm. There were three engine failures, resulting in forced landings. Fortunately, there was no ditching in the mighty Meghna. All the three aircraft were recovered within four hours. Had the troops been forced to travel overland, they would have had to traverse six water obstacles.

Interestingly, the operation halted when the army could not provide more troops or load. But it was also true that the helicopters themselves were begging for some respite. The Mi-4 with tail number Z-613 had a fire emergency on board and having had to force land, it was completely burnt. As Gp Capt Chandan Singh told Gen Sagat on December 12: "... machines were at the end of their tether...."

But by now, even Gp Capt Chandan Singh could've guessed the general's response : "... Chandan Singh, the war is on and let's get on with it ..."

A possible reason for the urgency shown by the IV Corps GOC was his knowledge that the Tangail drop had taken place as also the rumours about the likely intervention by the American 7th Fleet. But, in either case—whether the race was against another corps or against the Americans—there was no option but to press on with another SHBO by mustering all available aircraft.

#### **SHBO: DODHKANDI TO BAIDYBAZAR (NARAYANGANJ)<sup>41</sup>**

The helicopter maintenance crew deserved a lot of credit for having kept the machines flyworthy. By 0730 hrs on December 14, 1971, 12 helicopters were now positioned at Daudkandi. Due to non-availability of troops, the SHBO could commence only at 1030 hrs. By evening, 810 troops had been airlifted to the DZ Baidyabazaar, northeast of Narayanganj. With Indian Army troops having reached the doorstep of Dacca, the Pakistani

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41. Ibid.

forces were forced to capitulate. A major contribution to the victory comprised the “Vertical Envelopment” operations undertaken by the helicopters. The oppressors had been vanquished and were now themselves seeking protection from the Mukti Bahini cadres, under the Geneva Convention.

**Fig 6: December 14-16, Daudkandi to Baidyabazaar**



Source: Map has been adopted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Military\\_plans\\_of\\_the\\_Bangladesh\\_Liberation\\_War&oldid=916486435](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Military_plans_of_the_Bangladesh_Liberation_War&oldid=916486435)

On December 16, most of the helicopters had been taken up for maintenance during the morning hours and in the evening, 5 Mi-4s took part in the Dacca surrender ceremony.

### **WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD**

The diminutive Mi-4s had added another dimension to the conventional battlefield. By introducing the elements of surprise, force concentration and flexibility in the planning process, they made sure that they will not be left out of the planning consideration for future conflicts.

Gp Capt Chandan Singh recalls the words spoken by Gen Sagat Singh, "... these little helicopters, the Mi-4s had become worth their weight in gold."

He again heard these words being uttered at the surrender ceremony, this time repeated by Gen Aurora, the army commander under whom the war was fought in the eastern theatre.

## CONCLUSION

During the SHBO task undertaken by the MI-4s in the eastern sector, the final troop and load details can be tabulated as follows (these have been sourced/compiled from post war reports filed by individual units as a part of the Operational Record Book available in Ministry of Defence, History Division, Government of India Archives):

<b>December 7-15, 1971</b>		
<b>Sector</b>	<b>Troops</b>	<b>Load</b>
Kalaura to Sylhet	747	16,400
Brahmanbari to Raipura	1,286	12,530
Brahmanbari to Narsingdi	1,570	100,650
Daudkandi to Baidyabazaar	2,408	73,230
Total	6,011	202,810

There may be some errors in the figures, as the aircraft were being flown as a part of a composite task force and the load figures corroborated from the Operational Record Book may have some amount of duplication/error.

These figures seem to be unbelievable, but what is even more incredible is that the entire effort was undertaken with a maximum availability of 11 Mi-4 helicopters.

On December 7, 1971, at the commencement of the task at Sylhet, only five helicopters were deployed. The available strength increased to eight by December 8 and further to 10 by December 9. Thereafter, due to unserviceabilities and battle damages sustained, the availability remained in the range of 10-11 Mi-4 helicopters. The credit for this must go to the exemplary work carried out by the maintenance crew.

The experienced aircrew that had undergone conversion onto Mi-8s, did not take part. Of the rest, some like Fg Offr (later Air Cmde) RM Sridharan “Doc” did their first ever night SHBO sortie straight into the battle. Many contingencies had to be dealt with, which included converting pilots for night operations. Many of them (who were to be used as captains) were not night qualified. Many of them had never landed on unprepared surfaces. Various innovations such as use of *atta* (both wet and dry) to mark the helipads and the modification of torches to give unidirectional light were tried out. In addition, the “Kilo Force” helicopter was also available to provide air cover for the induction of the troops into Sylhet.

The figures of the numbers of troops carried and the load lifted over a period of eight days, when contrasted with those of the Tangail drop on December 11—which involved close to 50 aircraft, in which approximately 1,000 troops and 103 tons of ammunition were dropped—further highlights the role of SHBO operations by the Mi-4s.

The magnificent Mi-4s have not been accorded a formal send-off by the IAF and were simply replaced by the Mi-8s. May be they were deemed to be a part of the IAF fleet forever after having prove their worth as having been equal to “... *their weight in gold* ...”. The Mi-4, an example of which is parked at the Air Force Museum, certainly deserves much more respect, having played a stellar role in the war with Pakistan for the liberation of Bangladesh.