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# 1971 WAR: THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

ANIL CHOPRA

The 1971 Indo-Pak war was fought between two major combat ready armed forces. The Indian victory was decisive, and a new nation, Bangladesh was created. The Indian Air Force (IAF) played a very significant role. Achieving air supremacy in the east allowed a lightning blitzkrieg campaign for the ground forces. IAF also decimated a large part of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in the West. In its support to the Indian Army (IA), it helped contain and destroy large parts of the Pak Army and greatly cut Indian losses. Air Chief Marshal Pratap Chandra Lal, Padam Vibhushan, Padam Bhushan, DFC was at the helm of the IAF from July 16 1969 to January 15, 1973, precisely 3 years, 184 days.<sup>1</sup> Earlier he had been the Vice Chief of the IAF, directly running the operations in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. He not only oversaw the build-up to the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, but also had time for reflection and to imbibe lessons of the conflict. The professional standards, capability and flexibility of the much-expanded IAF had been put to the acid test. For Lal, it was the culmination of a long and distinguished career of an outstanding professional, an able leader, yet a very modest, unassuming, and

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1. Air Chief Marshal Pratap Chandra Lal, at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/1567>. Accessed on May 11, 2021.

gentle human being. In his book *My Years with the IAF*,<sup>2</sup> he penned his lifetime experiences and memoirs.

### **LAL—A TRUE PROFESSIONAL LEADER**

Lal was commissioned into the IAF in May 1940. Later, Squadron Leader Lal commanded the 7 Squadron, from July 1944 to September 1945 operating from Peshawar/Imphal. He was awarded with Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for flying reconnaissance sorties over the Irrawaddy plains in Burma (now Myanmar).<sup>3</sup> Lal was a graduate of the RAF Staff College. He held important posts like Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO) of the No. 1 Operational Command (later Western Air Command), and the Military Secretary to the Cabinet. He was leader of the evaluation team which led to the induction of the Folland Gnat. Later he took over as the Air Officer Commanding Training Command in Bangalore. In 1957, Lal was appointed General Manager of the Indian Airlines Corporation (IAC). He stayed there for six years. Lal held the prestigious posts of Air Officer Maintenance, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Western Air Command, and was the Vice Chief during the 1965 war. In September 1966, Lal took over as Managing Director of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), a post he held till July 1969. During his tenure, HAL began the production of MiG-21 and Gnat fighters, and the HS 748 medium transport aircraft. Lal became the seventh Chief of the Air Staff on July 16, 1969.

### **THE LESSONS FROM 1965 INDO-PAK WAR**

In 1958 Pakistani General Ayub Khan had taken over through a military coup. He ran a “Crush India” campaign, and began building an international Muslim block, and courted the USA. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war he began praising the Chinese. By 1965, Pakistan had got the top end F-86 Sabres and F-104. On the other hand, India had got just about 12 MiG 21s, and mostly had Mystères, Hunters and Gnats. So PAF’s technical fighter superiority had somewhat neutralised India’s numerical superiority.

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2. Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal, *My Years with the IAF* edited by Ela Lal (Lancer International, First Edition, 1986).
  3. Pratap Chandra Lal, Padam Vibhushan, Padam Bhushan, DFC, CAS, IAF Website, at <https://indianairforce.nic.in/content/pratap-chandra-lal-padam-vibhushan-padam-bhushan-dfc-cas>. Accessed on May 13, 2021.

The 1965 Indo-Pakistani War began following Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar, which was designed to infiltrate forces into Jammu and Kashmir from August 1965. India retaliated by launching a full-scale military attack on West Pakistan. On September 1, IAF was given the go-ahead by the government. IAF used Vampires and Mystères to attack Pakistan Army. The Gnats provided cover for the strikes, and early successes against Sabres in air combat greatly increased IAF confidence. PAF launched a massive attack on IAF airbases in the western sector at 5 p.m. on September 6, destroying some MiGs and Mystères on the ground. On 7th morning at first-light, IAF made a retaliatory strike on most major PAF airbases. Pakistan started running out of supplies by the end of the first week. Pakistani military installations were far from the border, so the IAF had to strike deep. PAF had acquired powerful radars and concentrated more on Air Defence assets. India believed that offensive was the best form of defence.

The 17-day war witnessed the largest tank battle since World War II. Hostilities between the two countries ended after a ceasefire was declared through UNSC Resolution 211 following a diplomatic intervention by the Soviet Union and the United States, and the subsequent issuance of the Tashkent Declaration. India had the upper hand over Pakistan when the ceasefire was declared. Lal linked this kind of hand back of Indian gains after the 1965 war and also the 1971 war as lack of Indian strategic firmness and excessive use of "good faith".

Some of the lessons learnt, including need for hardened aircraft shelters at forward airbases, better joint procedures and link-up between Army-IAF at all levels, and IAF needed an integrated air defence system of anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-air missiles and radars. Lal felt that the lack of a joint Naval Air plan<sup>4</sup> was a serious deficiency. Pakistan Navy could bombard Indian Naval base in Saurashtra under the very nose of IAF base in Jamnagar. This was prevented in 1971 through better joint planning and coordination. IAF also felt the serious shortcoming of operational airbases in Rajasthan sector. After the war, the Air Force Academy

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4. Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal, n. 2, pp. 164-65.

at Jodhpur was moved out and airfields built at Barmer (Uttarlai) and Jaisalmer.

### **1965—POOR INITIAL HIGHER LEVEL COORDINATION**

Lal felt, like many others in the IAF, that Indian Army often seemed to plan all its battles on its own, as if IAF and Indian Navy (IN) were to be treated as add-on bonus. Pakistani designs were known by early 1965. The Army Chief General Chaudhuri was discussing the ground situation with the political leadership.<sup>5</sup> The Air Chief was given only informal briefings. The Naval Chief was not kept in the loop. Navy's role was not expected to be a very big one.<sup>6</sup> In the guise of security, the Army Chief applied the "need-to-know" principle to such an extent that even the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and the joint intelligence and planning staff were not kept in the picture. Therefore, joint contingency plans were not made, and the three services were never clearly asked to plan for war. Things changed only when the Army was on the defensive in Chhamb and desperately needed IAF support. Things changed thereafter. No service can fight a war alone.

### **BETTER OPERATIONAL PREPAREDNESS—THRUST OF THE NEW AIR CHIEF**

Immediately on takeover as the Air Chief, Lal began building and preparing the IAF for better warfighting capability. He reorganised various aspects of IAF's training and logistics. He also visited many army formations to clearly understand the needs of air support at different levels. He emphasised improved tactics, operational training and careful planning. These contributed to making the IAF one of Asia's most effective air arms. His efforts did not go unrewarded.

### **PLANNING FOR 1971 OPERATIONS**

Lal felt that the armed forces were blessed to have two outstanding leaders in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi,<sup>7</sup> "whose ability to understand complex situations, identify major problems, and define clear cut lines of action."<sup>8</sup> Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram was cool,

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5. National Security Lectures, USI 1973, p. 13.

6. Ibid., p. 44.

7. Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal, n. 2, chapter 11, p. 167.

8. Ibid., pp. 166-67.

unflustered, quick-witted, cheerful, and he did not talk down to people. The period between March and December 1971 was well spent in good coordination between the three services and Ministry of Defence. There were adequate intelligence inputs. Pakistan's confidence to threaten India was bolstered by US and China support.

The objectives defined by COSC were to gain as much ground in the east as possible, and create conditions for early establishment of the possible state of Bangladesh. In the West, the target was to prevent Pakistani forces from making any gains.

The IAF prioritisation was air defence of homeland first, support to the Army and the Navy next, counter air bombing third, and para-drops, etc., came thereafter. Commands could change priorities for short periods. While the Western (WAC) and Eastern Air Commands (EAC) looked after their sectors, the Central Air Command (CAC) was tasked for all bombing, transport missions and support to the Navy. The Advanced HQ with each army command were strengthened, down to TAC and FAC level. The Indian Navy was doing its first operation. They decided to employ an offensive role, attacking Karachi in the West and using Vikrant in the East.<sup>9</sup>

### **FIGHTER OPERATIONS IN EASTERN FRONT**

In March 1971, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) declared independence from Pakistan, starting the Bangladesh Liberation War. Pakistan Army unleashed brutal suppression in an effort to curb the Bengali nationalist movement through Operation Searchlight. India continued to tacitly aid and prepare the Mukti Bahini. Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was signed in August 1971. Pakistan by now realised that Indian armed intervention in East Pakistan was imminent. By November, both sides were known to be violating each other's airspace. The first real aerial combat between the two airforces took place on November 22. Regular Indian Army troops engaged and mauled Pakistani armour at Garibpur. At 1449 hrs, four Pakistani Sabres<sup>10</sup> attacked Indian and Mukti Bahini forces in the Chowgacha Mor area. Four IAF Gnats of 22 Squadron which

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9. Ibid., p. 173.

10. The War of December 1971, IAF Website, at <https://indianairforce.nic.in/content/1971-ops>. Accessed on November 29, 2021.

were operating at Dum Dum Airport, Kolkata were launched. They reached the area of action when PAF was carrying out the third strafing run. In the air combat that followed, three Sabres were shot down. All Gnats returning safely. The first round in this air battle over Boyra had clearly gone in favour of IAF. It was a fair duel, 4 vs. 4. The Pakistan President declared national emergency on November 23, 1971. He announced that "Pakistan would be at war with India in next 10 days."<sup>11</sup> It actually happened that way.

Gnat squadrons were used for air defence duties and also for strikes against river boats and some other small targets. Young Flying Officers and Flight Lieutenants posted as sector directors in ADDCs handled some classic interceptions. MiG 21 strikes on Kurmitola and Tejgaon runways near Dhaka grounded the only 14 Sabres that were in the East and IAF achieved air superiority and gave freedom for action to both the Army and Navy. The Hunter aircraft didn't need escorts, so flew both strike and AD missions<sup>12</sup> flying from Hashimara to strike Dhaka.

### **JOINT OPERATIONS IN THE EAST**

The IAF worked very closely with IA's 2 and 4 Corps. The 4 Corps under Lt. Gen. Sagat Singh became a highly mobile strike force.<sup>13</sup> Their mobility was to a large extent due to very intelligent and bold use of IAF helicopters. It was a great example of jointmanship, and contributed a great deal to the collapse of East Pakistan. Station Commander Group Captain Chandan Singh at Jorhat interacted with the 4 Corps GOC. Two MiG squadrons at Guwahati and Hunters at Kumbhigram flew offensive support missions, all supported by ground FAC. No. 2 Para was selected for possible air drop at Tangail on December 11 at 1600 hrs. Tangail had the advantage of friendly population. A force of 50 transport aircraft (22 Dakotas, 22 Packets, six An-12s, and two Caribous) was marshalled. Gnats gave the fighter escort. Only one An-12 was hit and damaged by ground fire. It greatly helped that the GOC of the Corps was himself a paratrooper, and had lived and operated with the IAF for long.

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11. Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal, n. 2, Chapter 10, p. 154.

12. Ibid., Chapter 12, p. 195.

13. Ibid., Chapter 11, p. 177.

General Sagat made some valid points<sup>14</sup> about air support. He felt that the Army's training did not sufficiently factor in air support, as if it was to be treated as a bonus. The two needed to train much more together to understand strengths and limitations to be able to exploit to advantage.

### **PAF PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES—OPERATION CHENGIZ KHAN**

President and Martial Law Administrator, Yahya Khan chose to use the old Pakistani doctrine—"The defence of East Pakistan lies in the West". Pakistan Army had created a myth of invincibility, and propagated obsessive hostility towards India, with total disregard for ground reality. Pakistan Army Chief, Gen. Tikka Khan had expected the PAF to create a local limited period air dominance. The PAF thus launched pre-emptive strikes code-named Operation Chengiz Khan on the IAF western forward airbases, radar installations, railway stations, Indian armour concentrations, and some other targets on the evening of December 3, 1971. The Indian air defence radars were taken by surprise. Having learnt its lessons from a similar air strike in the 1965 war, India had secured its aircraft and airbase assets. The damage was minor and all airfields were back into full action within hours.

### **IAF'S OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS IN THE WEST**

The IAF Canberras struck back that night, and bombed eight Western Pakistani airbases, inflicting heavy damage. Fighter strikes followed the next morning. Within days, India was able to achieve air superiority. Thereafter concentration was on interdiction missions, to disruption of Pakistani communications, the destruction of logistics nodes and fuel and ammunition dumps. It was also to target Pak Army ground force bridgeheads and concentrations to thwart any offensive action. IAF also bombed the retreating Pakistan Army. In a very important air action in the Western desert, four Hunters of the OCU,<sup>15</sup> operating from Jaisalmer airbase, destroyed an entire Pakistani armoured regiment at Longewala, thus stopping major armour thrust into the desert.

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14. Ibid., Chapter 12, p. 216.

15. Ibid., Chapter 14, p. 280.



IAF carried out many other strikes deep in Pakistan territory. Targets were airfields, Karachi harbour, Sui gas plant, Attock Oil refinery, Mangla hydroelectric power plant, among others. Attacking the lines of communications paid good dividends.

### **AIR SUPERIORITY IN THE WEST**

Since IAF was flying much larger offensive missions, and PAF was mostly on the defensive, IAF was bound to suffer some losses. Most of IAF losses during the war were from the intense anti-aircraft fire. The IAF came out a clear winner in aerial combat. The MiG-21s got a chance for the first time to engage their famous old opponent, the F-104 Starfighter, in air combat. In all four recorded dogfights, the IAF MiG-21s outclassed them. Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon, flying Gnats with No. 18 Squadron from Srinagar, single-handedly engaged six Sabres, and shot down two. He was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra.<sup>16</sup> The fact that PAF could not interfere with our surface forces operations in both sectors was indicative that IAF enjoyed clear superiority.

### **COUNTER SURFACE FORCE OPERATIONS IN THE WEST**

Like in the East, there were great examples of jointmanship in the West at field level. IAF's immediate air support from Jaisalmer to the Company Commander Major Chandpuri, who was understaffed and overwhelmed by Pakistani tank regiment attack, at Longewala was a classic case of air support. IAF Hunter aircraft destroyed nearly 40 tanks, and Pakistani threat in the region was thus neutralised. HF-24s were used for both counter-air missions and also air interdiction across Rajasthan sector. HF-24s also got air-to-air kills. As Gen Fazal Muqeem Khan Said: "Mercifully the Indians did not pursue."<sup>17</sup>

Another event that played a decisive part was the IAF support to the IA in Chhamb. 191 brigade was continuously under attack west of Munawar Tawi River. IAF came in quickly, and offered 45 close support sorties a day. The front in Chhamb was just 10 miles long. IAF did a great job and saved near annihilation.

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16. Ibid., Chapter 12, p. 227.

17. Gen Fazal Muqeem Khan, *Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1972), p. 212.

In Shakargarh area, on IA's request, IAF bombed the minefields. A high tonnage of bombs was dropped. Pakistan Army had planned a massive Armour thrust in Fazilka and Suleimanke headwork areas. Indian defences were overwhelmed by Pakistani forces. IAF stepped in. Over 300 sorties were flown by day. IAF targeted Pak armour, fuel and ammunition dumps, and communication lines in Fort Abbas, Bhawalnagar and Haveli general area.<sup>18</sup> Mystères destroyed a train carrying 50 tanks between Okara and Montgomery. The area was also struck by Sukhois. IAF intercepted many trainloads of tanks, and other critical war supplies in Western Sector to immobilise Pakistani Army by isolating battlefields. Clearly, IAF made the difference. Even the Vampire and Harvard aircraft were used more effectively for Counter Surface Force Operations (CSFO). The Army used to ask for sorties by numbers, IAF insisted that the Army define the task.

#### **THE CANBERRA<sup>19</sup> AND AN-12 BOMBING<sup>20</sup>**

Canberras were at Gorakhpur, Agra and Pune. Canberras were used for bombing from the first night itself, and bombed in every sector of Pakistan. Bombing attack over Karachi on December 9 was coordinated with the Navy's attack on the harbour. While Navy claimed to have set Karachi on fire, actually it was Canberras which launched the first attacks on the oil storage in the harbour. Yes, Navy did its attacks, too. The Canberras of 106 Squadron were engaged in strategic reconnaissance.

On the night of December 3, six An-12s armed with 12 x 500 lb bombs each, including some napalms, struck the POL dump in Changa Manga Forest. On December 6, An-12s dropped 40 tonnes of old 500 lb bombs over artillery positions near Kahuta. Later they flew bombing missions to attack 18 Division HQ at Fort Abbas, and Bahawalpur. They also bombed the Sui gas plant. The bombing of Skardu by An-12s on the last day of the war was staged from Chandigarh. Out of the 36 bombs dropped on Skardu, 28 fell on the runway.<sup>21</sup> An-12 missions were all flown at low-level, adopting shallow glide bombing.

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18. Pushpinder Singh, *Aircraft of Indian Air Force 1933-1973* (New Delhi: English Book Store, 1974), p. 110.

19. Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal, n. 2, Chapter 15, p. 295.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

### **LITTLE OR DELAYED INTELLIGENCE**

Both the Army and IAF found the intelligence about Pakistani forces lacking. Indian armed forces fought the Pakistanis with little idea of the force levels and capability pitted against them. Inputs from civil intelligence agencies had little military value. This was a weak area. Despite many photo-reconnaissance missions, the post mission processing was very slow. The films were developed manually at station level, interpretation was at Air HQ, and the assessment sent to Army HQ.

### **NEED FOR SOUTH WESTERN AIR COMMAND**

The area of responsibility of Western Air Command was rather large. Learning from the 1965 war, it was clear that there was a need for a South Western Air Command (SWAC). Finally, SWAC was formed in 1981. Rajasthan sector had been strengthened by converting Jodhpur from a training to operational base. Two more airbases came up at Jaisalmer and Uttarlai. Jaisalmer earned its laurels in Longewala. MiGs in Uttarlai finally shot down two F-104 Starfighters using K-13 missiles.

### **FAILING AT COSC LEVEL**

Army HQ was most reluctant to discuss its plans in detail with the Air HQ, before or during the war. While the broad scope of the defensive operations was briefed, the contingency plans either in case of offensive or reverses were never shared. This was a failing at the Chiefs of Staff Committee level.

### **SUMMARY OF AIR EFFORT—1971 WAR<sup>22</sup>**

The fortnight-long war ended with unconditional surrender by Pakistan in the east and in the creation of Bangladesh. More than 90,000 Pakistani soldiers were taken prisoner. Pakistan suffered 6,000 casualties against India's 2,000. The IAF flew 7,346 sorties in the 14 days. Averaging more than 500 a day, 5,400 were combat missions. Gnats flew the most sorties at 1,275,<sup>23</sup> followed by MiG-21s, Canberras, Sukhois, Hunters and Mystères. As per the government

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22. Ibid., Chapter 16, p. 319.

23. Ibid., p. 320.

press release on December 17, IAF lost 42 aircraft, against PAF's 86. A large percentage of IAF aircraft on strike missions were damaged by ground fire.<sup>24</sup> Many were hit by own bomb debris. In the East every airfield was attacked by IAF. In the Western sector all major airfields were attacked, many repeatedly. Around 50 Pakistani trains were destroyed through air interdiction. IAF maintained aircraft and systems serviceability in excess of 80 per cent.

War in the east was a classic example of inter-services cooperation and the importance cannot be under emphasised. Inter-service personal contacts and friendships work wonders. Clearly brought out the importance of National Defence academy and inter-service courses.

The two times US Ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, wrote in *Washington Post*, of January 30, 1972, he believed that "... naïve, weary and poorly informed (US) President was charmed off his feet by a succession of Pakistani Generals with British accents and taste for golf, polo and dry martinis."<sup>25</sup> PAF lacked aggression and determination, and most attacks were inaccurate and seemed insufficiently planned. A good many technicians were Bengalis and that brought in maintenance issues.

### **ARMY'S—WE CAN HANDLE ALL SYNDROME**

Indian Army being the largest service always likes to take the credit for all successful operations, as was the case in Bangladesh. There appeared a general thought among the Indian Army that IAF should be part of the Army and Navy reduced in size or liquidated. Maj Gen Habibullah made such a case in his book *The Sinews of Indian Defence*.<sup>26</sup> Ever since, the Army has been pushing the case of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Even though, by chance, Manekshaw was the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, he was one among equals. In the COSC meetings he gave out much less information about the Army action, than he sought from the other two services. The Naval Chief Nanda and Lal did not want to make an issue at that sensitive time.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 338.

26. Ibid., Summing Up, p. 325.

27. Ibid., p. 326.

### **CASE FOR CDS**

On March 24, 1972, the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, P. N. Haskar, called Lal<sup>28</sup> who was visiting airbases in Assam, and asked his views about appointing General Manekshaw as the CDS in recognition of the way he had directed the Bangladesh war. Lal wrote back his views, clearly stating that all the three Chiefs and each service had contributed in its own way in the victory. Undoubtedly, the army did a good job and Manekshaw as the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee did coordinate well, but there was no case for CDS. In fact, there were risks of having an overbearing CDS who could run roughshod over other services. Also, if the Service Chief did not agree with the CDS, that Service will not push through the implementation of orders or will underperform. Therefore, all the service Chiefs must function as equals. He fully deserved the recognition of being made a Field Marshal, Lal said. Lal also felt that on points of inter-service friction, the Chiefs must display greater understanding, tolerance and good faith.

### **LAL LEAVES BEHIND A GREAT LEGACY**

Immediately after retirement, Lal was appointed full-time Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) of Indian Airlines Corporation (IAC). Lal also served as the Chairman of the Indian Tube Company, a part of the Tata Group. In February 1978, Lal was appointed Chairman of Air India also. Lal lived his life for the service and the country. He played a commanding role in both India's major wars with Pakistan, as the Vice Chief in 1965 war and as the Air Chief in the 1971 war. His contribution in both the wars was most suitably acknowledged and awarded by the nation. Lal died of a heart attack while visiting London on August 13, 1982. His body was flown to India in an Air India flight. He was just 65. He was cremated with full military honours. Among the pall-bearers were the former Chief ACM Arjan Singh and the serving chief ACM Dilbagh Singh.

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28. Ibid.