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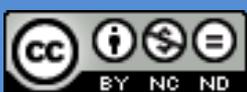
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An Endless Night

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Caption: The Mi-4s flying in formation over Bangladesh. (Photo courtesy: History Cell, Air HQ)



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Author's note: This is a story told by the veterans- through their memories, logbooks, and writings. India's first night-heliborne operation, deep behind enemy lines, unfolds through the voices of those who fought the war and dared the impossible. What was it like to fly into a storm of bullets, to navigate the pitch black without GPS, or to attempt what none had before? Today, we see the Battle of Sylhet through the eyes of its air warriors. Let the journey begin.

December 8, 1971

Undisclosed location in Kulaura/Kalura, inside enemy territory

They stood there, waiting. Biding time.

Anxious. Determined. Darkness had started crawling over their skin. The waiting men, mostly Gorkhas, stood huddled- their silhouettes flickering in the dim light of a dying sun. An eerie anticipation creeping up their spines. Their warm hands, grazing the rifles' cold metal.

They stood there, waiting. Anytime now.

And then they heard it. The throbbing roar- ripping the silent, cold air. Pulsating, rumbling waves. Behind them, in the far-off darkness, engines growled and rotors screamed. The mechanical beasts had come to life. And they were approaching the Gorkhas. The Mi-4s. The giant Indian Air Force choppers... Awakening to life, in the dark of the night. Coming to take the men- to the raging battlegrounds of Sylhet.

December, 1971

The town of Kailashahar. Ancient, quaint- nestled in Tripura's guarding mountains. The airfield here had laid dead for years.^{1 2} Remote, with no infrastructure³- ghostly winds murmuring stories of silence as they swept over it. But then, the war of 1971 happened and the Indian Air Force raised it from the dead. Owing to its proximity to Bangladesh or East Pakistan, as it was called then; the once-abandoned airstrip was now back in action. Despite the lack of resources, the IAF's men and machines adapted to what bare minimum lay there and catapulted themselves into action.^{4 5}

In the middle of this action were the 110 helicopter unit (commanded by Sqn Ldr Charanjit Singh Sandhu)⁶ and 105 helicopter unit (commanded by Sqn Ldr Pran Nath Chhabra)⁷, wielding the rugged Soviet-built high payload birds- the Mi-4. Stalin's men had created this beast to counter the American S-55 helicopters during the Cold War era.⁸ Soon, the Mi-4 was making its mark. From being the world's first helicopter to receive hydraulic booster flight control assistance to setting several new helicopter

world records including flying at 187 km/h and lifting 2,000 kg to a height of 6,018 m⁹- the Mi-4 packed aggression and loyalty for its pilots.

The NATO forces codenamed it- the Hound¹⁰

The Hound found its way into the Indian Air Force's helicopter fleet in the early 1960s.¹¹ With wild theories of diplomatic ploy and a cloak-and-dagger military deal trailing its acquisition.

The year was 1959, and the Soviets had let slip- perhaps mistakenly, perhaps on purpose- a hint of discord with China over the Sino-Indian boundary issue. The Russians were favouring us. India saw the tremendous military cooperation possibilities brewing out of the situation and without missing a beat, signed a quick, covert deal for the purchase of the Mi-4s.¹² The first ten Mi-4s came wrapped under the garb of "road construction" machines for the Border Roads Organisation.¹³ But by 1962, the Mi-4s had shed their innocent guise. The Hounds fought the Indo-China war and became IAF's medium-lift workhorse. Built like a flying tank, the Mi-4 was versatile and could navigate treacherous terrain.¹⁴

Years later, in 1971, one brave General, with an audacious vision realised the power of the Indian Air Force's helicopter fleet. Lieutenant General Sagat Singh's request to use the Mi-4s for the Army's troop transportation across the rivers and wetlands of East Pakistan, behind enemy lines, sent shock waves across the Army's top brass.¹⁵¹⁶ His bosses debated and pondered. But he wasn't taking a 'no'. It wasn't an ask- it was a decision.

And so, the Indian Air Force pressed forward its assets. And the Mi-4s found themselves, once again, in the middle of a heated war with Pakistan.

December 3

East Pakistan, a maze of rivers and marshes- one of the hardest terrains to wage a war.¹⁷ A natural defensive fortress for the deeply embedded Pakistani forces.¹⁸ The East Pakistani rivers flowed with great power and any attempt to cross them via boats with the Pakistani defensive posts manning the shores was suicidal. Among them, the mighty Surma River guarded the city of Sylhet- one of the most critical Pakistani strongholds of the war- a keystone of East Pakistan's northern defences.¹⁹ Sylhet's fall was crucial for the Indian Army to break Pakistan's grip on the region and open the path to Dhaka.

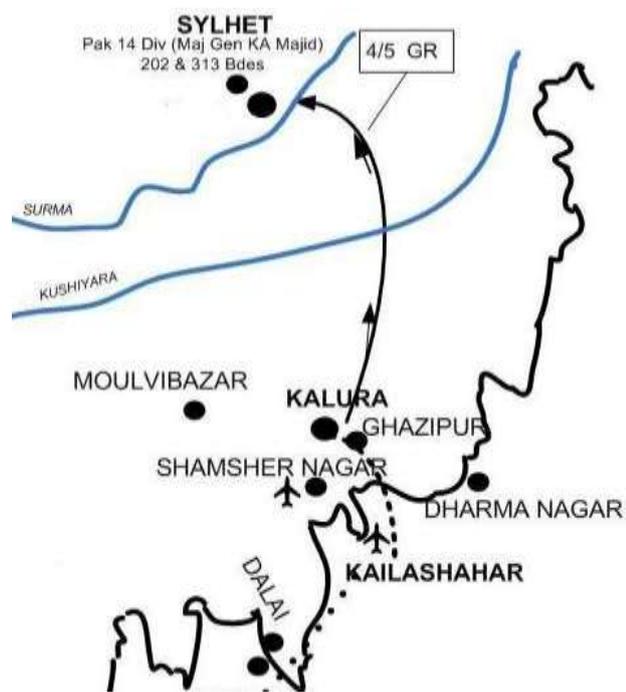


Figure 1. Above left, Map depicting the movements of the Indian Army and East Pakistani/Bangladeshi Refugees across Bangladesh.

Figure 2. Above right, Route map of the Mi-4s with Kailashahar, Kalura and Sylhet marked out. (Image Courtesy: Sqn Ldr Pushp K Vaid)

Lieutenant General Niazi, the Commander of Pakistan's Eastern Command; had designated ten key cities as 'fortress towns' and stationed most of his troops near the Indian border.²⁰ The plan was to delay Indian advances at the border, and then, retreat to these fortresses if the Indian offence became overbearing. Here, the Pakistanis were to defend until the last man and bullet. Niazi was confident that his strategy would turn the tides. In fact, in one of his interviews with foreign media, a confident Niazi gloated, "*My troops in the border outposts are like the extended fingers of an open hand. They will fight there as long as possible before they fold back to the fortresses to form a fist to bash the enemy's head.*"²¹

Sylhet was one of these fortress towns. And it needed to be brought down. But, crossing the river Surma and reaching Sylhet in record time was unthinkable, unless it happened through the skies.

December 7

After Lt Gen Sagat Singh's efforts bore fruit, the Indian Air Force was onboarded. The urgency to capture Sylhet coupled with a fleeting intel of Pakistan's 202 Infantry Brigade withdrawing from the city, bolstered Sagat Singh's hurried plans. Soon, the Special Heli-Borne Operation (SBHO) to drop an entire 4/5 Gorkha battalion into the town of Sylhet took flight.²² At 0830 hours on 7th December, Group Captain Chandan Singh (commanding officer of the Jorhat Air Force Station, overseeing the Sylhet heli-drop)

issued urgent orders. The 110 Helicopter Unit, equipped with its trusty Mi-4s, scrambled to the Kailashahar in Tripura at breakneck speed.²³ Gp Capt Singh himself, along with Sqn Ldr Charanjit Singh Sandhu, CO of 110 HU, flew off on a recce mission to zero in on the departure and the target helipad. The departure helipad from where the 4/5 Gorkha battalion was to be picked up was finalised as Kalura (present-day Kulaura), inside the East Pakistani/Bangladeshi territory. The target/dropping helipad was marked inside large cut paddy fields, a few kilometres away from the Sylhet railway station.²⁴

The Mi-4s had been stripped down and modified for this mission. Clamshell doors were removed to make troop drops swift and efficient.²⁵ Each helicopter, most of the time, was to carry more than its prescribed payload capacity- stretching its capabilities beyond the brim.²⁶

By 1500 hrs the same day, a Special Heli-Borne Operation or SHBO to conquer Sylhet was up and running.²⁷ The Air Force had jumped into the fray. East Pakistan's fate had been sealed.

Flying Officer Mirza Murtuza Ali watched his technical crew dart around his helicopter, as he replayed the mission plan in his mind for the third time. Barely two years out of training, he was still a war rookie- one of the youngest pilots in 110's line-up.



Figure 3. (Standing) Fourth from right, Air Cmde (then Fg Offr) MM Ali with his unit posing against the Mi-4. (Photo courtesy: Air Cmde MM Ali's personal archives)

The first wave had been almost incidence-free. But, by the time the second wave came, it was met with a sudden, aggressive Pakistani offence. The Indian Air Force's audacious manoeuvre behind the enemy lines had challenged the Pakistanis, and the skies had now become their hunting ground. The Mi-4s had held up admirably well so far. But no one knew what lay ahead.

1620 hrs. Time to Launch the Third Wave²⁸

The sun began its slow descent. Shadows started dissolving into the dusk. Ali climbed into the cockpit, the cold air sharp and still around him. As he went through the checks, his mind wandered back to the initial briefing. "No Pakistani resistance as per Army reports," they'd said. "Troops will be dropped without a hitch." It had taken just one sortie to know the on-ground truth. The wave of 8 helicopters knew they were flying right into the jaws of carnage.

Outside, the marshals gave the signal. Ali exchanged a sharp salute and opened up the throttle. The Mi-4 roared. The pulsating blade-vortex interaction radiating outwards as the blades sliced the air furiously. The hound conquered gravity and slowly rose through the air. As the machine flew obediently towards its fateful destination, the crew and the soldiers peered outside the window. Bracing for what was to come next.

Up amongst the grey, melancholy clouds, the December evening was cold and quiet. Those were the days without GPS. Paper maps, instincts, and memory guided the pilots of the eight Mi-4s over a landscape that looked bizarrely uniform from above. Forests blended into each other and rivers snaked endlessly- one stream flowing into the other and then another. Yet, the pilots held their course.

Soon, the landing zone came into view. The pilots, guided by their leader began their descent. Tall elephant grasses concealed the dusty landing pad. A perfect cover for the Pakistani defences as they lay in wait.

The eight Mi-4s loomed over the landing pad- like giant, magnanimous winged beasts, blocking out the last rays of the sun, casting apocalyptic shadows on the ground. The deafening sound of their rotors, splitting the air. Dust and grass exploded into the air, spiralling in frantic little tornadoes. Ali steadied the machine, his hands firm on the controls, his eyes scanning the chaos below.

They were right above their destination. Suddenly, the assault erupted. Bullets. Hundreds of them.²⁹

Tracer rounds streaked across the sky. Hidden among the elephant grass, the Pakistani soldiers had started firing incessantly at the Mi-4s.

Earlier that morning, Gp Capt Chandan Singh's recce chopper had given the Pakistanis just enough of a hint. They'd seen him scouting the landing zones, flying low and slow, studying the terrain. It didn't take them long to connect the dots- something big was coming from the Indian side. Silently, they regrouped, pulling forces from other positions to fortify the recce points. The IAF pilots had no idea what they were really flying into.

The intel given to the pilots was wrong. The 202 Infantry Brigade hadn't pulled out of Sylhet. It

was very much there. In fact, joining it over the course of the ops were to be the 313 Inf Bde, parts of 31 Punjab, 30 FF, 22 Baluch, and a battalion each of Tochi, Khyber and Thal Scouts- supported by 171 Mortar Bty (120 mm) and 31 Fd Regt (105 mm).³⁰

Despite the barrage of bullets rattling their fuselages, the Mi-4s fell into a pre-decided 'line astern' formation- like clockwork. Each helicopter would land in succession, one at a time, offloading its troops and taking off before the next came down. The rest tailed after, ready to replace their comrades as soon as the ground beneath was clear. It was a tactical manoeuvre designed to minimise damage and casualties.

Ali focused ahead, lining up his Mi-4 with the landing spot. And then, his eyes caught the unmistakable glow of tracer rounds rushing towards him. For a fleeting moment, the world seemed to slow. And then the impact happened. He could almost hear the bullets lodging themselves on the Mi-4's body. But his hands didn't falter. The training took over, drowning out the fear, and the Mi-4 touched down with a heavy thud.

The moment the wheels hit the ground, Gorkhas poured out in a blur of movement. One after the other, bolting from the chopper- at a frightening speed. Their boots pounding the earth as they fanned out, instantly dropping to crouches to avoid the bullet rain.



Figure 4. Gorkhas exiting the Mi-4s at breakneck speed. An artist's impression. (Photo courtesy: History Cell, Air HQ. Artwork: Gp Capt D Gohain and Flt Lt JA Patil)

Ali's mind was a storm- between keeping the chopper steady, watching the panels for any anomaly, observing the direction of assault and assessing the ground situation. At the back of his mind, the warning from the briefing flashed: *"Do not lose sight of your flight path. Do not fly ahead. That's enemy territory. Turn back at all costs."*

In seconds, the Mi-4 was empty, the Gorkhas were all gone. Without missing a beat, the flight engineer's horn bellowed- sharp and urgent- signalling the pilots: troops offloaded, time to go. Snapping back into attention, Ali gripped the controls and pushed the throttle. The Mi-4 gave a slight jolt, as if responding to his master's commands, nodding in agreement, and lifted off the ground. Continuing to take bullets but climbing up rapidly to join the formation heading back home.

High above the battlefield, another helicopter hovered, watching the battle unfold. A smaller bird, nimble and agile- offering an unbroken view of the assault below, through its wide dome-shaped windscreen. Peering out from this Alouette aircraft was Gp Capt Chandan Singh. Watching his men navigate the fearsome enemy fire, braving the deadly rain of bullets. All the helicopters carried bullet marks. One of them was so badly hit that most of its instruments had stopped functioning and it had a total electrical failure.³¹

As he flew back, he shot one last lingering look at the battlefield below. He had seen enough for the day. His jaw tightened as he made up his mind. Although the battle and heli-drops were not over, he was not going to sacrifice his men and machines like that. No. They were not going to return to this damned place at night.

Flying Officer Satish Chandra Sharma jumped out of the Mi-4 and hit the ground amidst heavy firing. The helicopters were barely 15 feet above the ground when the bullets started tearing through the air, shaking the machines. The pilot inside was barely keeping the helicopter together. He shouted over the storm of bullet fires, "Get out now! Jump! Jump!" Sharma, along with a dozen Gorkhas, leapt out in a flash and hit the dirt hard.

Attached to the 4/5 Gorkha battalion, his role as Forward Air Controller was critical- to coordinate air support and attacks³², guide reinforcements, mark enemy positions and communicate the availability and safety of the designated landing pads to the friendly aircraft flying above using his RT set.³³ But for now, pinned down with Lieutenant Colonel Arun Bhimrao Harolikar, the Commanding Officer of the Gorkhas³⁴ and his men, survival was the only mission. The Pakistanis held the high ground- a deadly advantage.

With each passing moment, the Pakistani war cries of Allahu Akbar were getting closer. The

enemy forces were closing in rapidly... preparing to charge. Sharma could see the faint glow of muzzle flashes growing bigger, marking their approach. Around him, soldiers cautiously crouched low in the elephant grass- some already injured and bleeding. And although the night was descending upon them rapidly, he was sure that the Mi-4s will bring back reinforcements- any time now. That is the hope he, they all, were clinging to. But the choppers didn't come.

About 250 stranded soldiers scattered across the field, trapped under relentless enemy fire- outnumbered, outgunned, and surrounded.

The Pakistani soldiers were closing in fast. And the Indian soldiers had only two choices in front of them. A choice to surrender and probably get a shot at life. Or attack and possibly die, hoping that the next wave will keep up the battle.

Lt Col Harolika looked at his troops, thought for a moment and took the decision.

"We attack. Before the Pakistanis come to us, we'll take the fight to them."

The plan was to crawl towards the enemy positions, in the cover of darkness, holding their fire to conserve ammunition and avoid detection. When close enough, they would unleash a surprise assault- khukris in hand, engaging the enemy in fierce close-quarter combat. Every soldier was to fight till his last breath.

The plan was relayed through whispers across the fanned-out men. And thus began their perilous crawl, slithering through the tall grass, towards the sparks of enemy fire.

As they reached their attacking spot, the Gorkhas let out their blood-curdling war cry- "*Jai Mahakali, Ayo Gorkhali!*" With that, they surged forward. With terrifying speed and fury. The enemy, caught off guard, barely had time to react before the Indians were upon them. The air erupted with screams, gunshots, and chaos.

Sharma charged along with the others, heart pounding in the chest. The battle was fierce and raw- demanding everything a soldier could give. But the Indians didn't falter. Their ferocity overwhelmed the Pakistanis who broke ranks and fled.

Soon, the Indian soldiers had secured and taken over the Pakistani post- the first foothold in Sylhet.³⁵ Marking the beginning of a campaign that would soon cascade into the fall of Dhaka. But the night was far from over. The Gorkhas, although weak in numbers and tired, decided to spread out and continue with the attacks. Hoping that even if they fought and died, their comrades would come and avenge them.

Night had fallen. Back at Kailashahar, the Army and IAF were locked in a heated debate. A defiant Gp Capt Singh had refused to send any more of his aircraft and men into the dangerous war zone at night. He had seen the Pakistani attacks and was not willing to knowingly sacrifice his men in the dead of the night.³⁶ Brigadier C. A. Quinn, commander of the 59th Mountain Brigade had his tempers flaring.

Owing to the dearth of time and assuming it to be a continuous, non-stop operation till the entire battalion is heli-dropped; the Army had not fully planned the sequence of movement- on who would go first or what equipment should accompany them. Crucial supplies and vital signal equipment were left behind, leaving the troops already air-dropped into Sylhet cut off- stranded, with no way to call for help.³⁷

After what seemed like an eternity, the two sides reached a consensus. Gp Capt Singh had a condition- only one aircraft would go in for the next drop. If it returned safely, only then would the rest follow.

To pull off this dangerous, high-stakes task- Gp Capt Singh turned to his trusted flight commander (operations manager)- Flight Lieutenant Pushp Vaid.³⁸ A seasoned pilot, managing the SHBO.

Around midnight, Flt Lt Vaid's Mi-4 ascended into the pitch-black sky- loaded with equipment and personnel. During the day, Vaid knew the terrain well- its rivers, forests, and landmarks serving as his guides. But in the dark of the night, all these features had dissolved into nothingness. With no GPS and only a compass to help him- his instincts, experience, and a vague estimation of 20 minutes of flying time to Sylhet guided him towards the city. His boss Gp Capt Singh had cast doubts over his survival. But Vaid's unwavering bravery had carried him this far.

As the Mi-4 approached Sylhet, an unexpected voice suddenly crackled over Vaid's frequency: *"This is Hell Cat. About time you guys came!"* The voice was that of Fg Offr Sharma (codenamed Hell Cat) who was maintaining a constant vigil of the skies. The moment he heard Vaid's helicopter, he broke into the frequency. Sharma informed Vaid that they had managed to bring the Pakistani post under their control but the stranded troops were running low on reinforcement and ammunition.

To guide Vaid's helicopter to the landing area in the pitch-black night, he proposed lighting a fire. A Gorkha soldier volunteered to strike the flame. But as the fire sparked to life, the Pakistanis got alerted. Hundreds of tracer rounds zipped through the air like fiery arrows. The Gorkha was hit on the thumb but miraculously survived. Refusing evacuation, he shouted that he would rather hunt down the enemy who had wounded him.

As Vaid spotted the faint, flickering fire lit by the Indian troops, he flew right in that direction.

Tracer rounds converged on him like moths on a burning flame. The Mi-4 shook under the onslaught but Vaid pressed on, undeterred, his focus locked on the landing pad. His instructions to his passenger troops were sharp: "Jump out with your equipment the moment we land. Otherwise, I'll be shot down". With enemy fire hammering from all sides, the Mi-4 touched down. Within 30 seconds, the soldiers had dashed out with their equipment and Vaid was ready to lift off. The helicopter clawed its way back into the sky, climbing rapidly, leaving the cacophony of destruction behind.



Figure 5. *Above right*, Sqn Ldr (then Flt Lt) Pushp Vaid during the SHBO. (Photo courtesy: Sqn Ldr Pushp Vaid's personal archives.)

The radio at the Kailashahar Air Force base crackled to life. On the other end was Flt Lt Vaid, on his way back. As he narrated his miraculous trip, shocked murmurs rippled across the station. It was clear that the pitch black of the night had worked in the Mi-4's favour. The Pakistanis had no visual lock on the helicopter and were firing blindly based on the sound. Hence, the lucky escape.

Odds were calculated, mission plans re-calibrated. And then, Flt Lt Vaid sent out the mission orders- a mission so ambitious it would tilt the war.

The Indian Air Force was going to execute **India's first-ever night heli-borne operation behind enemy lines.**³⁹

A daring attempt- with no manual, no playbook, no precedence.

Pitch-black skies, blacked-out terrain and enemy fire- flying the hulking Mi-4s in such a scenario was a deadly mission. If successful, the operation could change the course of the war.

December 8

A tense, all-consuming darkness threatened to bury the motley airstrip of the Kalashahar airfield. It was a cold December night and the Indian Air Force was about to launch an audaciously dangerous mission. For the first time ever in the history of IAF, a night heli-borne ops deep behind the enemy lines.

The faithful Mi-4s, the magnificent beasts, stood awaiting their masters' orders.

The pilots opened their throttles. The rotors thudded louder, drowning out every other sound. As the helicopters flew into the sky, the world below vanished, cloaked by night's shadows. An endless, suffocating darkness. Flying Officer Ali strained his eyes, seeking landmarks. The once familiar terrain- the trees, rivers- everything was now a faint outline, a dark blur.

And then, she came into view. The great river spreading out below. The Surma. Its meandering form breaking through the darkness, catching and reflecting the dainty shimmer of a weak moonlight. Its gushing waters guiding the Mi-4 fleet forward, in the right direction.

Inside the choppers, against the great rumbling of the rotor blades- the Gorkhas sat quietly. Ready to join their brothers. Braced for the unknown.

Far, far below, Fg Offr Sharma lay hidden with his stranded troops. They knew that the Pakistanis would hit back harder with reinforcements. But, Flt Lt Vaid's daring sortie earlier had given them hope- their own reinforcements were on the way. Their eyes and ears attuned to the slightest sound from the sky. And then it happened.

Over the murmurs of ghost winds, Sharma heard it- the unmistakable thrum of the iron birds- getting louder. The Mi-4s were approaching. A whole wave! The loud, roaring beasts announcing their arrival.

A bolt of excitement ran through the troops and the Gorkhas dashed forward to light up goosenecks to signal their rescuers.

The guiding lights of the goosenecks flared to life. And from a few hundred metres above, from inside the cockpit, the pilots caught it almost instantly.

The Mi-4s had now crossed the line of engagement. Around 150 metres above ground, in the eerie cockpit darkness, faint wisps of instrument lights radiated off the pilots' faces.

Suddenly, the sound of enemy gunfire tore through the sky- bullets rattled against the body of the Mi-4s. The Gorkhas on board remained still, their eyes scanning the ground. Their minds racing. Would the helicopter hold together? Their comrades on the ground were giving cover fire with whatever ammunition was left with them. But the enemy was coming down hard.

The Mi-4s pressed on- giant armoured birds cruising through the hailstorm of tracer bullets. Alighting themselves above the slowly dying gooseneck-lit landing pads.



Figure 6. Enemy bullets rained down on the Mi-4s as they tried to land in Sylhet at night. Fire lit by the Gorkhas visible in the bottom-left corner. Artistic impression of the night heli-ops. (Photo courtesy: Sqn Ldr Pushp Vaid. Artwork: Gp Capt D Gohain.)

The landing drill was the same. Get in a diagonally vertical line-like formation. Wait for the helicopter ahead of you to land, drop the load and take off first. Once it's taken off, proceed to land. But as the lead chopper descended, the rotors' downwash extinguished the gooseneck flames completely, plunging the landing zone into complete darkness.⁴⁰

But the sky seemed to burn. The glowing trails of the tracer bullets raining down on the choppers. The incessant firing sent jolts of flashes into the sky- confounding, blinding. The enemy was on a rampage.

The pilots, guided by their training, saw through the darkness and the chaos. As each of them tuned out distractions and focussed on the top of the chopper ahead of them. The flashing, guiding

beacons, perched atop the rotors of the helicopter in front of them were to be their guiding lights for landing now.

The pilots quickly adapted and aligned themselves to the rotor tip lights. The Mi-4s pushed on. Becoming one with the will and spirit of their pilots. One by one, the helicopters started descending- delivering the fearless Gorkhas into enemy territory. The soldiers rolled out swiftly, weapons at the ready, joining their brothers to hold the ground against the onslaught. The Air Force had created history.

Despite the enemy fire, the Mi-4s lifted off and returned- again and again. Meals, sleep and fear had become non-existent. That night, the five Mi-4s together executed 14 sorties, evacuating the injured and heli-dropping 124 troops and 2500 kg of equipment into the battlefield. The firing was on till the last sortie.⁴¹

By December 9th early morning, the relentless operation paid off. 649 soldiers, along with 13,000 kg of their load had been heli-dropped into Sylhet.⁴² A fierce battle ensued. And just a battalion of the brave Gorkhas was able to hold back two Pakistani brigades in Sylhet- cutting off their retreat and deployment at Dhaka.

The critical heli-drop at Sylhet and the numerous other heli-bridge operations were amping up the fall of East Pakistan.⁴³

The image shows two pages of handwritten flight reports. The left page is dated 7th Dec 1971 and the right page is dated 8th Dec 1971. Both pages have a header with columns for 'DATE', 'TIME', 'PILOT', 'A/C', 'MISSION', 'NO. OF TROOPS', 'WEIGHT OF LOAD', 'STATUS', and 'REMARKS'. The entries are numbered 1 through 15 on the first page and 16 through 27 on the second page. The reports describe various sorties, including troop drops and equipment deliveries, with specific details on aircraft used (Mi-4, Mi-17) and the number of personnel and cargo transported.

Figure 7. A couple of pages from the now declassified daily flight reports of 110 Squadron’s Sylhet Heli-drop ops. Entries from the 7th and 8th December, 1971. (Photo courtesy: History Cell, Air HQ)

Finally, on the 15th of December, the entire Sylhet garrison surrendered. Niazi’s fortress had fallen. But what stunned the world was the fact that over 8,000 troops (including three Brigadiers and two Colonels) from Pakistan surrendered to less than 550 personnel of the 4/5 Gorkhas!⁴⁴

The 1971 Indo-Pak war went on to become one of the shortest in history.⁴⁵ On the 16th of December, the world witnessed the largest military surrender since World War II. 93,000 Pakistani troops conceded to India.⁴⁶ And a new nation, Bangladesh, was born.⁴⁷

As the surrender treaty was signed at the Ramna Race Course, the air warriors held their heads high. Carrying the pride of a job well done. Realising the history they had written for their nation.

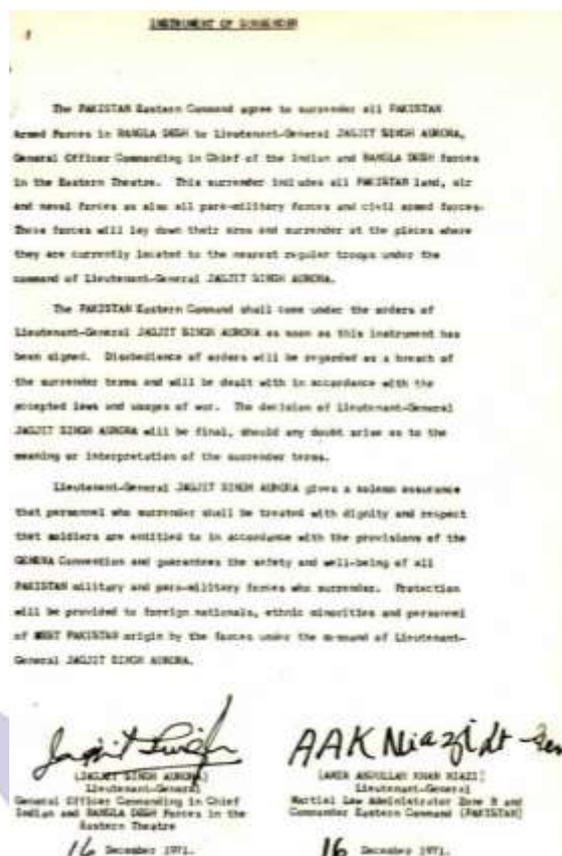


Figure 8. *Left*, Instrument of surrender being signed by Lt Gen Niazi (Commander, Pakistan's Eastern Command). *Below left*, Lt Gen Aurora (GOC-in-C, India's Eastern Command); Standing immediately behind- *Left to Right*: Vice Admiral Krishnan, Air Marshal Dewan, Lt Gen Sagat Singh, Maj Gen JFR Jacob and Fg Offr SS Krishnamurthy. (License: Government Open Data License - India (GODL))

Figure 9. *Right*, Text of the Instrument of Surrender. (License: Government Open Data License - India (GODL))

The Mi-4s, the formidable iron birds earned their place as silent heroes of the 1971 war, ferrying soldiers across mighty rivers, great forests and into history itself- daring to land where others feared to tread.

And while this story of the forgotten heroes and their legendary machines may have faded from memory; the legacy of their courage continues to thrive on the pages of history- reminding the generations- that victory often rests on the wings of the fearless.

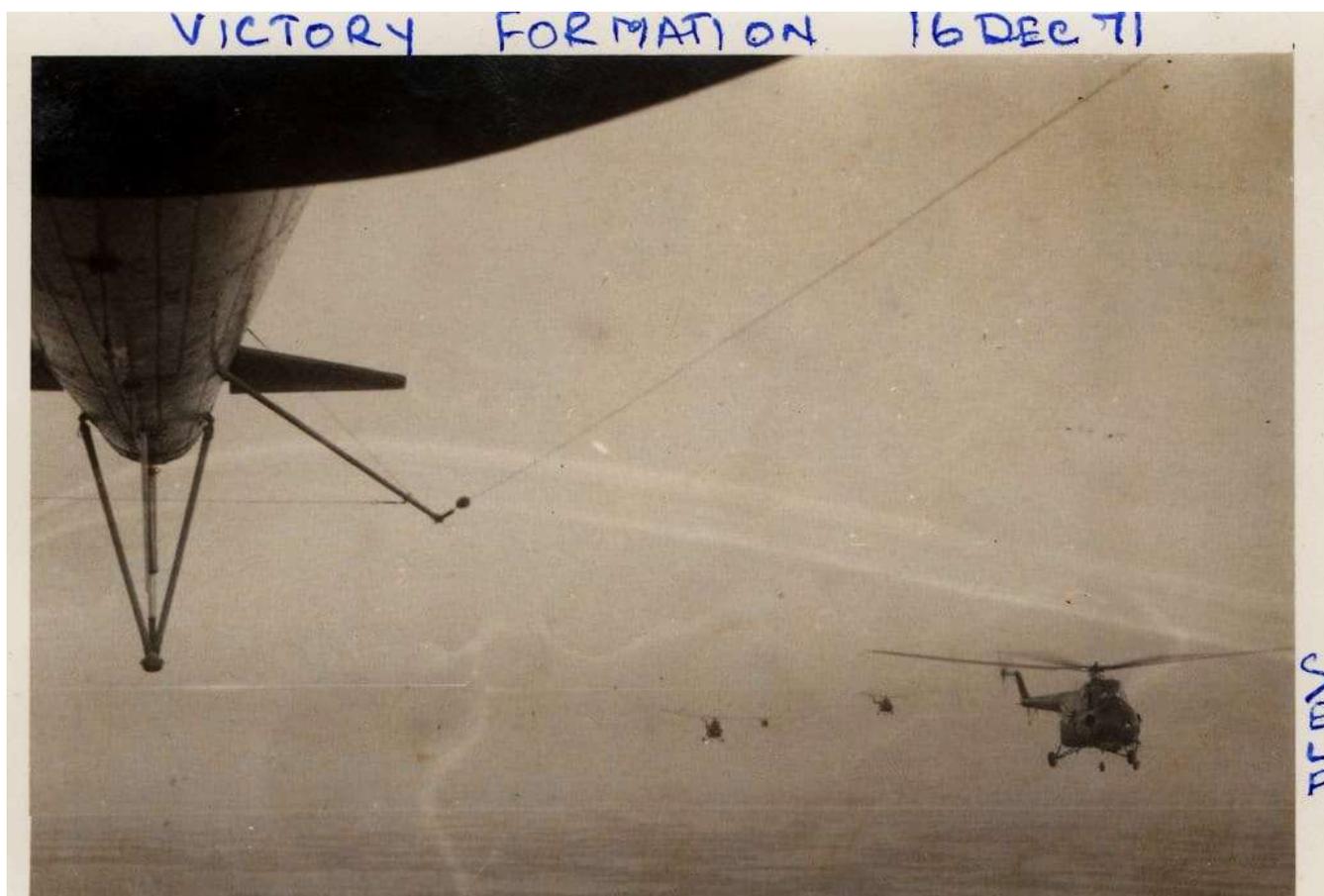


Figure 10. Victory formation- flown by the Mi-4s. (Photo courtesy: Air Cmde R.M. Sridharan's personal archives.)

Notes:

¹ Air Cmde C M Singla, "Kilo Flight and the Birth of the Bangladesh Air Force", *Colours of Glory*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.coloursofglory.org/kilo-flight-birth-bangladesh-air-force/>. Accessed on September 29, 2024.

² Daily Sun, "The Month of Victory", <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/593676>. Accessed on September 30, 2024.

³ Air Cmde Nitin Sathe, "1971 War: A brave Dakota pilot's contribution", *Rediff News*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/nineteen-seventy-one-war-a-brave-dakota-pilots-contribution/20210325.htm>. Accessed on September 29, 2024.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Air Cmde Singla, n. 1, "Kilo Flight and the Birth of the Bangladesh Air Force"

⁶ Bharat Rakshak, "No.110 Helicopter Unit Vanguard", <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/indianairforce/database/units/list.php?qunit=110+HU>. Accessed on November 7, 2024.

⁷ Bharat Rakshak, "No.105 Helicopter Unit Daring Eagles", <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/indianairforce/database/units/105+HU>. Accessed on November 7, 2024.

⁸ The Helicopter Museum, "MIL Mi-4 'Hound'", <https://helimuseum.com/heli.php?ident=mi-4>. Accessed on November 14, 2024.

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