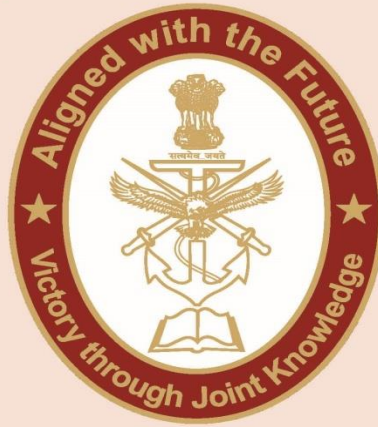


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**BOLT FROM THE BLUE:
INDIAN NAVY ENSURES
ABJECT SURRENDER
OF PAKISTANI
MILITARY DURING
BANGLADESH
LIBERATION WAR**



Kamlesh Kumar, Senior Fellow Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS), New Delhi. He has been researching about Chinese Defence and Security matters for last 15 years. He has written several articles on Chinese Military matters.

BOLT FROM THE BLUE: INDIAN NAVY ENSURES ABJECT SURRENDER OF PAKISTANI MILITARY DURING BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR

This article is based on the narrative of Indian naval operations in the Eastern Theatre during the India-Pakistan War of 1971, described in detail by Vice Admiral GM Hiranandani (Retd.) in his Book 'Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy 1965-75.'
It was authored as part of Indian Navy History Project.

The Context: Unsustainable Contradictions between West and East Pakistan

The sovereign State of Pakistan which came into existence in 1947 was geographically so located that its Western and Eastern parts were separated by the entire landmass of India. The separation in real sense was much more than just spatial. There were such huge inter-se contradictions in terms of culture, language, ethos, thinking – and in fact, every walk of life – that the fault lines began to appear soon after initial euphoria of independence wore off. The self-anointed sense of superiority of West

Pakistan's Urdu-speaking Punjabi Diaspora over Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis, progressively manifested in systematic ill-treatment of their Eastern brethren. The East obviously resented and resisted such behaviour, to the point of insubordination and general disobedience.

In this tenuous environment, Awami League won an overwhelming majority during the 1970 general elections in East Pakistan; and sought greater political and administrative autonomy from West Pakistani tyranny. However, West Pakistani political and military leadership had no intention of 'obliging' the 'Bengali muslims.' The Pakistani military forces – majorly staffed by West Pakistan's populace – in turn, started highly oppressive organised pogroms. When the West Pakistani excesses became intolerably overbearing, East Pakistanis, led by their elected leader, rose in rebellion in March 1971. The Pakistani military carried out a widespread ruthless crackdown to quell the rebellion. Millions of East Pakistanis fled this prosecution and took refuge in adjacent Provinces of India. Thus, India got involved in this complex humanitarian crisis of gigantic proportions, ill-initiated by West Pakistani rulers. When Pakistan refused to create suitable conditions for return of these refugees to their homeland despite UN appeals and global outrage, Indian political leadership came under increasing popular pressure to act militarily to liberate East Pakistan, so as to facilitate their return.

The Prologue: Clouds of War bode Ill for Pakistan¹

Accordingly, serious confabulations between the Indian political and military leadership towards military action to resolve this crisis commenced in March 1971 itself. Without going into the subsequent dynamics of the closed door high level decision-making process, the Indian military Forces were ordered to prepare for war, sometime in the last quarter of that year. While the main objective – of liberating East Pakistan – lay in the eastern sector, the Armed Forces were to be ready for all-out war, given Pakistani military movements towards India-Pakistan borders commencing June 1971. The historical

¹Vice Admiral GM Hiranandani, 'Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy 1965-75' (Spantech & Lancer, New Delhi, 2000), Chapter-7, available online at <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Transition-to-Triumph-07Apr16.pdf> (accessed 09 December 2020).

Pakistani propensity to initiate futile offensive attempts in western front first, was also a factor.

The war finally commenced when Pakistani Air Force carried out pre-emptive bombing of Indian forward airfields in the western sector on 03 December 1971. The Indian Army had its war plans for the eastern sector quite well laid out; and Admiral SM Nanda, Chief of the Naval Staff also decided to pitch in with the entire might of the Indian Navy. In hindsight, the Indian missile boats from the Western Naval Command wrote a glorious chapter of chivalry and innovativeness by attacking enemy ships in Karachi harbour and setting fuel dumps on fire. Pakistani military does not seem to have got over this humiliation till date. However, this article highlights vital contributions of the Indian Navy in eastern sector, towards accomplishing complete decimation of the enemy in East Pakistan.

Naval Action in the Eastern Sector: Brings Pakistan to its knees

Naval Headquarters had issued an 'Operational Directive' to the Eastern Naval Command in September 1971 which translated into following specific tasks:-

- Attack from the sea on Chittagong harbour.
- Attack from sea on harbours at Cox's Bazar, Chalna, Khulna and Mongla.
- Clandestine frogman/diver attack on enemy ships in above harbours.
- Destruction of enemy ships and opportunity targets in these ports/at sea.
- Diversionary or real amphibious landings.

Indian Navy's actions towards fulfillment of above tasks were so overpowering, that they brought the much vaunted Pakistani military Forces in East Pakistan to their knees in double quick time. The most effective one was the conduct of air operations from aircraft carrier Vikrant. The other equally successful one related to training and assistance of the maritime element of 'Mukti Bahini' indigenous guerilla Force in conduct of clandestine missions.

Air Strikes and Contraband Control by INS Vikrant: Debilitating

The Eastern Fleet comprising INS Vikrant and its escort/strike Force successfully dodged the gauntlet thrown in by Pakistan and its submarine 'Ghazi' – which incidentally met an ignominious end off Visakhapatnam – by way of active deception. The carrier arrived off East Pakistan's coast, just at the commencement of hostilities on 04 December 1971. The carrier-borne Alize anti-submarine warfare aircraft initially conducted extensive reconnaissance of Bangladeshi coastline, as also deep inside the riverine channels. They also carried out umpteen day and night rocket and strafing strikes in Chittagong harbour, Cox's Bazar, and river ports of Chalna, Mongla and Khulna. Enemy gun boats, merchant and cargo ships, barges, tugs and smaller craft in these ports, or sailing in the Pussur River were either sunk or severely damaged. Runways and airfield installations at Chittagong and Cox's Bazar Airports were also bombed. By the evening of 07 December 1971, complete air superiority over the East Pakistani coastline was achieved, with no evidence of any enemy aircraft on the ground or in the air.

When it was foreseen that the weak-spirited Pakistani troops may make a desperate attempt to escape via sea or air, with possible interference of the USS Enterprise Carrier strike Force – which was rushing towards Bay of Bengal – renewed sense of urgency to quickly conclude the Indian naval campaign, took over. Therefore, another concentrated attack to flush out and destroy hidden/camouflaged ships and watercraft in these ports and rivers was undertaken by Vikrant's air wing.

12 December 1971 was a day to remember for the Indian naval aviation. Heavy bombing of runways and installations at Chittagong and Cox's Bazar airports was repeatedly undertaken by the day and night sorties of Sea-Hawk fighter aircraft, to render them totally unusable by any type of aircraft. Ships leaving harbour were also attacked by rocket fire of Sea-Hawks. By the time INS Vikrant left the area for refuelling on 14 December 1971, Pakistani military in East Pakistan, facing comprehensive rout by the Indian Army and Air Force attacks, was on the verge of spectacular defeat – and abject surrender.

While the use of the air wing of INS Vikrant was obviously instrumental in hastening Pakistani military's defeat, another role of carrier led Eastern Fleet in establishing contraband control and enforcing blockade also proved to be vital in isolating East Pakistan logistically and administratively from the sea. No enemy warships could approach East Pakistani ports to reinforce the beleaguered Pakistani Forces. No cargo ships or tankers for logistic support of Pakistani military were allowed to enter harbour. Enemy merchant ships, ferries, craft and barges leaving harbour were apprehended and sent towards Indian Territory off Kolkata.

In fact, a prize catch was the apprehension of two Pakistani merchant ships on the night of 09 December 1971. They were masquerading as foreign ships, but attempting to transport fleeing Pakistani military men and their families back to Karachi. INS Brahmaputra and Beas frigates of the carrier group carried out shore bombardment at Cox's Bazar on 12 December 1971, and severely damaged whatever was left of port and airport infrastructure and facilities, to preclude even their residual usage towards Pakistani military's escape.

Assisting Maritime Elements of 'Mukti Bahini': Hurting the Rear

In accordance with the declared national policy of "*...doing everything to lend support to freedom fighters...*"² About 400 naval commandos and frogmen were trained by the Indian Navy for up to three months. These comprised deserted or dismissed East Bengali Pakistani sailors, angry merchant navy seamen and a large number of nationalistically motivated University students. They operated from two civilian craft of Kolkata Port Trust, suitably modified as 'Mukti Bahini' gunboats, with 40 mm naval guns fitted onboard. This guerilla Force was used quite effectively to carry out pre-emptive attacks on ships, ferries, pontoons in harbour and port installations from seawards.

² The statement of External Affairs Minister in Indian Parliament on 29 July 1971, cited in 'Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy 1965-75' *ibid*, p. 168.

They carried out daring clandestine attacks every month commencing 15 August 1971. They sometimes swam up to 12 miles in complete darkness, breathing through reed pipes while pushing limpet mines, attached the mines to ships' hulls, and beat a hasty retreat. In the four months leading to commencement of hostilities, these frogmen sank or damaged over one lakh tonnes displacement of shipping, sabotaged jetties and wharves and blocked navigable channels in ports and rivers. A hapless Pakistani military account recollects thus:³

"By mid November 1971, strategic and tactical mobility of the [Pakistan's] Eastern Command had been reduced to minimum due to extensive guerilla activities in the rear. Numerous road bridges, ferries, river-craft and ships, which were the sole means for transporting troops and logistics from one place to another, and across rivers, were rendered unusable".

The Epilogue: Eternal Humiliation

Pakistan Navy, well and truly confined to Karachi Harbour due to offensive deployment and blockade by the Indian naval units from Western Naval Command, did not dare to send even one ship towards East Pakistan. All their bravado of fierce fighting spirit and high risk-taking abilities came to nought. The submarine threat to the eastern sector also vanished after 'Ghazi' sank – on account of unprofessional combat planning and tactics – at the start of war. With Pakistan in no position to cause any threat from the sea, INS Vikrant's air wing totally decimated all air or surface opposition inward of the East Pakistani coastline. Overall, About 57,000 Tonnes equivalent of enemy ships were sunk, damaged or incapacitated by Vikrant's air strikes. In addition, three Pakistani Navy gunships – PNS Jessore, Comilla and Sylhet – were destroyed. In fact, so complete was the surface and air domination of the Vikrant carrier group off East Pakistani coast, that not one enemy ship or aircraft of any description remained capable of sailing or flying.

³ Major General Fazal Muqeem Khan of Pakistan Army, 'Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership' (National Book Foundation, Islamabad, 1973); as cited in 'Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy 1965-75' ibid, p. 170.

The combined all-round Indian armed Forces' attack ensured abject surrender of Pakistani military establishment in East Pakistan in less than two weeks. The hopes of Pakistani military which banked on the US to help them against an ill-advised campaign against India were simply shattered. The USS Enterprise carrier strike group heading towards Bay of Bengal with much fanfare – somewhat raising Pakistani hopes of a face-saving opportunity – eventually did not come in, for lack of any viable option. Unbeknown to the broken-spirited Pakistani military, an amphibious landing near Cox's Bazar was scheduled to cut off any attempted retreat of enemy soldiers southward by land towards Myanmar. In retrospect, it did not matter, as the enemy in East Pakistan chose the option to surrender in large numbers, on 16 December 1971.

The Indian Navy – and particularly its aircraft carrier Vikrant surpassing all expectations – covered itself in glory towards the final outcome of liberation of Bangladesh; thus becoming an intrinsic part of history which – what was left of – Pakistan will always remember.

Shano Varuna!!!

CERTIFICATE

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