

Maj (Retd) MUMTAZ HUSSAIN SHAH gives a first hand account of the battle

After serving for only ten months in Headquarters 53 Brigade at Comilla and Chittagong, my course was cleared for promotion to the rank of major in July 1971. It necessitated my premature reversion back to the regiment. My battalion - 37 Punjab was located over 1600 kilometers away from volcanic East Pakistan in screen metropolis of NWFP - Peshawar. Three years' mandatory inter-wing posting tenure foiled my chance of rejoining the battalion, which I had joined as 'one day old chick' as aptly phrased by late Major General Abdullah Khan Malik - my first commanding officer. I joined 31 Punjab on 18 August on permanent posting, located at Sylhet1 (Map-2) - a border town about 200 km NE of Dacca (now Dhaka). The Battalion Headquarters were at Khadium Nagar in North Eastern suburbs of town on Sylhet - Jaintiapur Road. The commanding officer (CO) - late Lt. Col Riaz Hussain Javed, deputed me to command Headquarter Company, which dampened my spirits. It was not a welcome change at all - from staff officer of a brigade to the command of LOBs2. I voiced my concern unequivocally. CO promised to post me to a combat company as soon as possible.

Virtually I had nothing much to do in the new assignment, except quick familiarization with the battle locations. These daily errands to the forward areas lasted for about a week. One morning my CO and me were summoned to 313 Brigade Headquarters for an operational briefing. Brigadier Iftikhar Rana, the Commander briefed me about the impending task, which I had to undertake with a motley organized force.

31 Punjab was to spare a regular platoon (37 all ranks), under a JCO3. 100 Razakars4 and a company (150 persons) of Mujahids were placed under me from the brigade resources. In phase one, I was to dislodge Mukti Bahini5 from two police stations namely; Jagnathpur and Durye (Map - 3) about 72 and 84 km SW of Sylhet respectively. In phase two, convert both the police stations into strong fortress and train Policemen and Razakars. In the third phase, I was to withdraw with regular troops and Mujahid Company to Sylhet, leaving behind the Razakars and sixty Policemen who were to join me later. The task was to be completed in six weeks.

Subedar Sarfraz's regular platoon and Captain Matee-ur-Rahman's Mujahid Company joined me in the evening. We left for Kamalpur about 30 km south of Sylhet at 8 PM by road, where the Razakars joined us and the force was transferred to the country boats. By midnight we were on our way to the first objective. It was pitch dark and fear of unknown was nerve shattering. Only splashing of ores broke the mysterious silence of night. Thanks to Razakars' precise navigation, we reached east of Jagnathpur at the dawn, when a sniper's randomly fired bullet cautioned us.

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Muktis were completely surprised. The police station and the village were captured without much of resistance. The rebels abandoned the position leaving stocks of Indian small arms ammunition and three dead. We captured a Mukti - Matloob in late forties and his seventeen years old son - Feroz. Both professed no links with rebels and swore holding Holy Quran in their hands, pleading for mercy. Matloob's persistently swearing on Holy Book and reciting Kulma wilted me. I let them off.

The remaining day was spent in re-organizing the defences and burial of dead. Subedar Sarfraz with 100 men including a section (10 men) of regular troop stayed at Jagnathpur for show off force in the area. With the remaining force I proceeded to Durye at first light the next day.

In the ensuing five hours boat journey we didn't encounter any opposition till the objective was in our full view. Suddenly a rocket hit the scout (leading) boat. It capsized with three of its inmates. The entire column was under intense mortar and small arms fire. Our attack on a well-defended locality made agonizingly slow progress. In the evening the town fell, but clearance of the small pockets of resistance prolonged the battle well beyond dusk. As the night approached, the rebels escaped in cover of darkness. We suffered 20 casualties; seven killed, three missing and ten injured. Muktis carried away their casualties for us to guess their losses.

As the battle euphoria died down, I sat to write my first ever pitch battle experience for the war dairy. Soon I faced a nerve-wracking situation. The news of recovery of four non-Bengali Muslim teenager girls from Muktis spread like wild fire in the camp. Their ensuing narration was horrifying. The victims hailed to adjacent District of Mymnsingh and were in the camp for more than five months to cook and serve meals to Muktis. Helpless girls were molested repeatedly by their captors. One of them carried four months old pregnancy. All were so shattered that they solicited to be put before firing squad.

Durye6 was a beautiful small town on the southern bank of River Surma, comprising of about 350 houses, mostly bhashas (local straw huts), only accessible by rivulet. It was a Hindu dominant area. The concrete houses mostly belonged to the wealthy Hindus. The police station, a primary school, rest house and huge rice storage shed were other government buildings made of bricks and mortars. The empty rice store betrayed the Indians hollow claims of helping Bengali population against non-Bengali usurpers. The entire rice crop stored for locals was whisked away to India.

For the first time in 24 years of independence the Police Station hoisted Pakistan National flag. The town was totally deserted - not a single soul, except my troops. The next day I visited the village school with Captain Matee. I saw him pulling down and ripping apart a nicely prepared chart by some students in local dialect, hung in a classroom. On my inquiry the officer reluctantly told me that it contained insinuated blasphemy.

I observed that my troops were imbued with the desire to go across the river in the island opposite the rest house where I had shifted my office and was residing there too. To unearth the secret of these hilarious ventures, I went to the island with an escort. I came across a civilian, Parkash Dutt - the headmaster of Durye School. After exchange of

pleasantries I asked him about the blasphemy material recovered from his school. As expected very cunningly he parried the core issue and invited me to his nearby bhasha.

I was perplexed when two beautiful young girls received me in typical Hindu style at the threshold of the house. He narrated a cock and bull story, how Muktis killed his wife for his loyalties to 'motherland' and since then he was running from pillar to post with his young daughter and niece. The man was shedding crocodiles' tears and the girls wailed. The enacted drama was so moving that a mujahid from my escort had tears in his eyes.

I called the local councillor to verify the antecedents of Parkash. I was told that he was a diehard Awami Leaguer. His wife and children are living across the border and the two girls accompanying him are not related to him in any way. Parkash sensed the trouble and before I could evict him from the area, he bolted with the beautiful maids, never to be seen again. The implied interest of my troops in the island weaned suddenly. Once I asked volunteers for a newly established post in the island. I drew blank.

One day I saw death so closely that the memories of which still send shivers down the spine. It was nothing but my foolhardiness. During one of usual evening stroll on the home bank of river, lightly clad and unarmed, unwittingly I touched the hornet nest. I only realised when a group of five Muktis captured me. They blindfolded and tied me to a tree for executing by firing squad or put me to death by 'practicing bayonet on a live dummy.' The distance between life and death shrunk ominously. A slight movement of the trigger was enough to take away a 26 years old silly youth's life.

Suddenly there was a hush hush. Someone came and removed the blindfold from my face and exclaimed, 'Captain Sahib.' Before I could regain my numbed senses the man stood before me saying, if I was to be killed, they will have to eliminate him first. Who could be this messiah? I took time to gather my lost wits and recollected that the messiah was none else than my ex captive - Matloob. His son Feroz was also there, but the youngster opposed his father's verdict vehemently.

I discovered that Matloob was an eloquent demagogue and stole the show once again. First he had wilted me to secure his release and now prevailed upon his kin. I was let off to tell this tale of marked difference in the perceptions of two generations; the one who had struggled to cast off yokes of British and Hindu slavery and the one born independent but led away by relentless secessionist pressure in the post independence era.

In the first week of September I received the promised draft of sixty policemen and their intensive training commenced. But it was really disappointing. Hardly a hand picked were willing to accept their new role to fighting the insurgents independently. Unfortunately they were kept completely in dark before embarked to a different role. The carrot and stick policy while drafting the manpower from Western Wing proved rueful when the balloon went up.

In the first week of October I returned back to Sylhet and few days later was promoted. I took over command of C Coy from Major Ghulam Rusal. The company had just arrived at Sylhet (Solitkar) Airfield from the north to recuperate with a spate of new responsibilities. By the time I settled in new role, Indian random belligerence had turned into naked aggression. Some of the important border towns of Tahirpur, Chattak and Sunamjang had already fallen to the Indians.

My battalion was placed under command of a newly raised 202 Brigade. Brigadier Saleemullah was pulled out from Marshal Law duties to assume the command of dummy brigade on 1st October. He was assigned rather impossible task of holding 105 km front from Latu to Snamjung, defending all the main approaches to Sylhet from north and NE. Other than my battalion one Mujahid Battalion, three companies EPCAF, two companies Khyber Rifles and one company of Bajour Scouts were placed at the disposal of the brigade.

There were no tanks and no anti-aircraft guns. Only five artillery pieces against a regiment of eighteen guns were given to the brigade. Extended frontage caused total depletion of scant artillery resources. The guns were dished out to battle localities in ones and twos in total disregard to the principles of artillery employment.

According to the fresh allocation of tasks, my battalion was given 55 km front against 3600 yards frontage as per our tactical doctrine. All the four approaches to Sylhet from north and NE were to be defended by 31 Punjab. My company was detached and placed under the Brigade Headquarters, located close to the airfield. CO had no option but to deploy the regular troops astride the main approaches and cover the yawning gaps between each coy with assortments of para military forces. Thus the battalion was spread over the frontage in a thin line with no reserves.

My company had a 10 km area to defend, nearly fifteen times more than an infantry company's capabilities. My primary task was to guard the only airfield in the area and also defend the shortest but less expected Lathi - Sylhet approach. EPCAF and Khyber Rifles elements beefed up my defences. To compensate for the dearth of the mines and booby traps, we were asked to lay panjees. 8 Indian Mountain Division, spearheaded by 59 Mountain Brigade was waiting for the final onslaught.

It was 21st November, the Eid-ul-Fitr was being celebrated throughout the Muslim world with religious fervour. We had barely finished our Eid prayers, when my forward positions reported Indians concentration, requesting for artillery fire. The artillery duel commenced and continued till afternoon.

Indians launched a two-pronged attack on 31 Punjab front after midnight. A Coy in Latu - Dakshinbhag area and B Coy SW of Umagar - Kalegram were attacked simultaneously. A Coy despite heavy odds under Major Sarwer held its grounds. The second prong on Major Azhar Alvi's B Coy was more lethal. The mujahids guarding the coy's left flank abandoned their positions and joined invaders. B coy was mauled completely. Major Alvi and his men laid their lives. Only few stragglers could reach the Battalion Headquarters at Cherkhai to tell the tale.

A Coy positions were readjusted in Charkhai - Rajaganj area to deny Indian further breakthrough by mid-day 22 November. CO 31 Punjab had nothing left with him to influence the battle. Counter attack by milking troops from different position on the night 22/23 November gained a foothold. But by the dawn a determined Indian attack nearly annihilated the troops in the foothold. We lost over seventy men, including Major Sarwer and 2nd Lieut. Danial Utard. Major Ghulam Rusal and Lieut. Afazal Hazir and more than 50 men were injured.

My front was rather quiet, except Indian artillery intermittent shelling and IAF merciless pounding of different localities including the town and field hospital became a daily routine. There were reports about Indian concentration in area of Kunkhola and Gurukchi, opposite my platoon nearly 12 km ahead of my main defence.

The news of all out war and 'successful' pre-emptive air strikes by PAF from the Western Front on 4 December was received with a sigh of relief. The marooned troops in Eastern Theatre were jubilant, as it they were sick of gradual attrition of past nine months. Very few could profess the doomsday lurching around them. The news of capture of Chamb (now Iftikharabad) and Amritsar bolstered our sagging morale but it gave a worst blow when turned out to be cruel joke.

The entire province was devoid of air cover. The only twelve PAF fighters (F/86) at Dacca were grounded as the air base runway was damaged beyond repairs by IAF in first five days of war, notwithstanding heavy losses inflicted upon the aggressors. Thus IAF had complete monopolized the skies. Lack of anti-aircraft guns made the situation gloomier.

At about 4 PM on 7 December my troops spotted enemy helicopters flying at a safe height towards SE heading towards Surma River rail/road Bridge south of town. I was ordered by the brigade major (BM) to take reconnaissance petrol and find out more about the helicopter movement. I commandeered a civilian pickup and rushed towards possible helicopter landing site. Luckily the landing was far away from the River Bridge. Nine to ten helicopters had landed, after off loading the troops flew back to ferry the second contingent. Later on the landing force was identified as 5 Gurkha Rifles with approximately 400 men including the commanding officer.

The new development was really threatening. The possible objectives of this force were to capture of 'Y' junction south of Sylhet and the River Bridge intact. The successful culmination of which could have cut off withdrawal route of 31 Punjab and also denied 313 Brigade entry to the town from the south for eventual Sylhet Fortress battle.

To contain the enemy at the landing site, we resorted to an unorthodox method. A lone gun from Cherkhai was pulled out and brought to my location. Major Ghafoor a gunner officer on intelligence duties was tasked to pound enemy landing force, which I indicated to him on map. The enemy suffered heavy casualties by our accurate shelling. It forced him to dig down. Fortunately it never came out. Our forces in Charkhai and 313 Brigade in the south withdrew on 14 December unscathed for the final Sylhet Fortress Battle.

The commanding officer of 5 GR, Lt. Col AB Harollikar won coveted award of Maha Vir Chakra (equivalent to our Halil-e-Jurrat). The casualties due to shelling provided him excuse simulating a hopeless situation and being subjected to repeated attacks by us, which were repulsed by his gallant Gurkhas. Indian high command constituted an inquiry against the recipient of MVC, when facts were revealed after the surrender.

We could hardly listen to the Radio Pakistan news bulletins. The distances involved and outdated relaying system at Dacca was a bane. Listening to BBC or All India Radio was most depressing. Both were relaying hard facts difficult to swallow. It was more disheartening to visit Brigade Headquarters, where one could get a current overview of entire War Theatre. It was demoralizing to see red arrows depicting enemy forward thrust closing on Dacca and blue goose eggs representing our dispositions were squeezing and vanishing.

By 7 December our fates were completely sealed. War on western front ran into stalemate. Our Eastern front was at the verge of capitulation. Enemy's psychological propaganda was at full swing. Indian Army Chief was demanding surrender from the besieged troops through his repeated radio broadcast. Trailing behind was a humiliating defeat - a betrayal to the innumerable sacrifices rendered by a tenacious fighting machine against heavy odds.

Then came 16 December 1971. A short winter day appeared unusually long and gloomy. As the day wore away, the screen tea gardens of Sylhet turned into somber paleness. The sun slowly slipped down in the west. Gradually, the flaming horizon was wrapped in a thick dark blanket, studded with twinkling stars of nursery rhymes. The battle front lay quiet and dormant. The cracking sound of small arms fire petered into mysterious silence. No zooming of enemy artillery guns. No strafing and bombing by enemy air force.

I got into my bunker rather earlier but could not sleep. The cold bleak night was too depressing. The uncertainties were haunting us. The day's lull added to our apprehensions. Every face indexed a question. Is a storm in the offing?

I don't know when I slept. It was around 6:30 in the morning when sound of field phone woke me. Naib Subedar Sardar Ali, commanding a forward defended locality was on line. Without usual pleasantries or salutation he jolted me, 'Sir, an Indian officer wants to speak to you.' Surprised and infuriated, I asked, 'An Indian officer! How the hell is he there with you. Has your post fallen to Indians' No sir. back came the reply. 'My post holds on, Dacca has surrendered yesterday!' This was the storm that rocked us in the hush silence of 17 December morning.

The war was lost, while the battles were still raging on! Sylhet Garrison surrendered without testing enemy strength in the much awaited Battle of Sylhet Fortress.

- Footnotes.** 1. Sylhet is now called Rajnagar.
2. LOBs are the noncombat soldiers
3. Junior Commissioned Officer.
4. Local civilian volunteers.

5. India raised nearly 100,000 strong force from deserted armed forces officers and men.

6. Now Durye is either renamed as Markuli, or it is in the same vicinity but not shown on Map - 3.

7. Panjees are two feet long pieces of bamboo stemmed in ground at an acute angle and concealed. The sharp edge facing the enemy. Japanese used it effectively against the allies in Burma, during the 2nd World War.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major (Retd) Mumtaz Hussain Shah was born on 19 July 1945. Commissioned in Punjab Regiment in July 1966. He saw operations in former East Pakistan during the 1971 War. a graduate from Command and Staff College, Quetta, he is associated with number of training institutions as guest speaker. As a freelancer, scribes for the leading national dailies; including The News, Dawn, The Nation and The Muslim. He is also associated with Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation as an international cricket commentator.

