

Sagat and Helicopters

True Pillars of Victory

*Rajesh Isser**

This article looks at the real issues that were responsible for destabilising the centre of gravity of Pakistan Army in the eastern sector. Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Sagat's contribution was instrumental in creating Bangladesh in the shortest possible time. With the narrative all about this axiom, the article documents the original military plans for the campaign and how Sagat forced everyone to adapt through his engineered and controlled chaos. It also documents the critical role of the Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters, so well embraced by a dynamic and open-minded general. In specific, the contribution of the ageing Mi-4 helicopters is spelt out. More importantly, a deeper analysis follows of why Lt Gen Sagat's brilliance and the indomitable courage of the IAF helicopter pilots was subdued and brushed under the carpet. It is important to learn the right lessons from history rather than an agenda-based documentation.

Keywords: Sagat Singh; Niazi's Fortress Strategy; SHBO; Heli Bridge

INTRODUCTION

India's support to the hapless people of then East Pakistan is worthy of remembrance. In supporting the Mukti Bahini and subsequent War of Liberation, India not only saved millions of future Bangladeshis but also helped create a new nation. The Pakistan Army-led genocide was worse than words can describe. I can vouch for this because of witnessing it as a child. The following short account clearly shows the genocide that took

* Air Vice Marshal Rajesh Isser (Retd) is an IAF veteran with combat experience in Kargil War, DR Congo (UNPK), Siachen Glacier and IPKF (Sri Lanka). As Director, Net Assessment at HQIDS, he has coordinated and authored many national projects.



place during the 1971 Liberation War and why India's intervention must be regarded as a great and historical humanitarian effort.

A Personal Trauma of the Author

My father was in the Foreign Service, and we had come back to India in end-October 1971 just a few months before the war. Our otherwise blissful time of three years in Dacca included the almost eight months under house arrest by the Pakistani Army. This included the full high commission with families. All of us were confined to a multi-storey complex at Kakrail, with only one officer allowed to go along with a coolie to Shanti Bazaar, once a week, to do the whole community's shopping. No school, no outings, and yet we kids made the most of it. The current COVID lockdowns and restrictions do not compare! The entire lot was evacuated by two planes of Swissair and Aeroflot one fine day sans any luggage. Everyone lost everything.

Even as small kids we saw it all from our windows and roofs of the six-storey building. I witnessed the genocide first-hand along with others in the mission. The horror of killings at point blank, screaming of women being gang-raped, naked men being paraded and made to crawl on the hot asphalt roads. The worst was the massacre at Shanti Bazaar. One fine Sunday, there was a big commotion in the building, and everyone went to the roof. One could see the huge marketplace at a distance which used to get packed on Sundays. A few fire engines had gathered and armed forces in huge numbers with vehicles mounted with machine guns. In an orchestrated move, they blocked Shanti Bazaar's all exits just when it was most crowded. And then they set fire to the ring of shops that surrounded it and fired at people running away. The fire engines stopped the fire from expanding to unintended places. Later in life, during school lessons of history, I would compare it with Jallianwala Bagh massacre in India during British rule.

Sometime in March of 1971, the Awami League organised a night procession with burning torches or mashaals. We watched the unending procession for hours from our roof. That is how popular the movement for justice had become. But the repercussions were quick and heavy. A vivid example was the Dhobi Ghat cluster right behind our building. You could see all the activities from the roof or windows facing it from our building. Two days after the march, it became a flurry of activity. Pakistan security and army surrounded the village and made sure no one escaped. All the women and old were herded out somewhere in vehicles. The women were taken

into the huts, and the screams and cries all day long told their own story. All the men and grown-up boys were beaten and tortured in the open for the whole day in a telling public display. At night, there were distinct gunshots that continued for some time. That ghat never got inhabited till we were evacuated eight months later in October.

The only thing that we were allowed to carry back to India was my little sister's (3 years then) doll which was taller than her. On landing at Palam at a ground reception, my sister and her doll became a star attraction of news reporters—she was there on all front covers the next day along with the horror stories that families related. Many years later, my parents told us that it was a touch-and-go situation with everyday full of uncertainty of whether we would survive or not.

ASSISTING THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH

If there is any home-grown campaign in India that truly boosts the concept of jointness, it is the war for liberating Bangladesh. The multiplying effect of synergy between the three services created magic on the eastern front, while containing damage in the west. The whole gamut of joint support structures, such as Advance Headquarters (HQs), Tactical Air Centres (TACs), forward air controllers (FACs), ground liaison officers (GLOs) and others, worked in a coherent manner to achieve air superiority in the east and effective offensive air support in the west. The blitzkrieg on the ground in East Pakistan, ably supported by a well-coordinated air campaign, demonstrated the air–land battle concept well before it came into common parlance in the 1980s and the 1990s.¹

Wars, it is said, are fought in the minds of the Generals, Air Marshals and Admirals. Nothing could be truer than what was demonstrated in the lightening moves of the Indian Army/Indian Air Force (IAF) combine in the east. Learning from the Vietnam campaign, the IAF top brass, in collaboration with Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Sagat Singh, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 4 Corps, conceived a series of special heliborne operations (SHBO) that leapfrogged Indian infantry into the centre of gravity of General (Gen) Niazi's forces. Indeed, the early surrender was due to the speed of advance that even took the Indian Army HQ by surprise! This was surely the best example of what mutual respect and faith in each other's capabilities could bring about among the Indian Armed Forces.

While the historical focus remains on the pioneering SHBO that redefined tactics, commanders at all levels displayed remarkable ingenuity and creativity to grab every opportunity for denting the enemy's might—special armed operations by helicopters along with the Mukti Bahini is one such story. Though a drop in the ocean in the overall scheme of things, the effect it had on the morale of local fighters and populace was immeasurable. Recent campaigns of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) underline support as lynchpin for success; the Indian Armed Forces demonstrated it well in 1971.

INNOVATIVE EMPLOYMENT OF HELICOPTERS

While helicopters as war machines, vital suppliers and gunships were first employed in France's Algerian campaign in 1950, it was the Vietnam War that brought them to the fore as a game changer in such dirty wars. Helicopter employment was only limited by a commander's creativity and risk-taking limits. The whole world sat up and took notice—and so did a few Indian commanders during the war for liberation of East Pakistan in 1971. Lt Gen Sagat Singh was the maverick corps commander of 4 Corps, one of the formations which was tasked with offensive operations towards Dacca from east. He was not very well liked by peers and superiors for his maverick attitude, but he had seen what the Mi-4s could do during the 1966 Mizoram campaign by Indian joint forces, that is, SHBO and vertical envelopment of adversarial forces. Supporting him in leveraging the potential of the Mi-4s were pilots and crews of helicopter units (HUs) of the IAF. Together they orchestrated the most audacious series of operations over one week with just over a squadron worth (11–15) of Mi-4 helicopters from 110 and 105 HUs. They, in fact, did the unthinkable and produced a miracle that only a fog of war throws up.

Using Mi-4s to launch whole battalions and brigades across innumerable waterways that included the mighty river Meghna and its tributary, Surma, Sagat and Group Captain Chandan Singh first bypassed and bottled-up the Sylhet garrison with merely a battalion, and then Heli-lifted two brigades to the doorsteps of Dacca. This left Dacca vulnerable and forced its garrison to surrender.² Though Sagat was made to wait for other formations to catch up, the series of heliborne operations that he executed could well be considered to be gamechangers that accelerated the collapse of the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.³

THE AIR–LAND BATTLE CONCEPT IN THE EAST

Concept of Operations: Indian Army⁴

The Army Commander, Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, had reminded his formation commanders that the battle in East Pakistan would be a fluid one and his operational instructions should be used as a basis for general guidance. Thus, though the final objectives would remain unaltered, formation commanders should be prepared to constantly review thrust lines and intermediate objectives as per changed situations. These modifications involved bypassing sizeable enemy strongholds, which not only indicated a significant change in concept but also expressed a growing confidence and realisation by the Eastern Command that a swift advance into the vitals of East Pakistan would threaten Dacca and bring about a total collapse and defeat of the Pakistani forces. Initial plans catered for securing the line of the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. Further detailed planning could only be done taking into consideration the progress of various thrusts. It was envisaged that 4 Corps would cross Meghna between Daudkandi and Bhairab Bazaar and advance towards Dacca. The 101 Communication Zone Area with 95 Mountain Brigade (Mtn Bde) group of four battalions, 2 Para group, followed by 167 Mtn Bde, would advance towards Dacca from the north. It was felt that these forces would be supported in their advance to Dacca by Siddiqi Force, a large group of freedom fighters which had been operating with good effect in Tangail district.

Contingency plans were also made for elements of 2 Corps to cross the Padma River at Goalundo, for which suitable inland water transport craft were placed at Dhubri to assist 95 Mtn Bde or move elements of 20 Mountain Division, if required. Army HQ reserve of 50 Independent Para Brigade was to provide one complete battalion drop and two company drops. It was appreciated that the most important area for the main drop was Tangail in order to ensure early pressure on Dacca. Second priority was given for two-company drops to assist in securing Magura if necessary. Due to the limited availability of Mi-4 helicopters, all these helicopters were allocated to 4 Corps to enable them to ferry troops as required. The air effort allotted to the army was sufficient to cater for an average of 120 sorties per day. Naval forces were to blockade Chalna and Chittagong and the naval air arm was to be used in the area of Chittagong–Cox's Bazaar.⁵

The Mi-4 units had seen continuous operational service in India's north-east, supporting the army's counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland and Mizoram, lifting commando teams into action and helping to pre-empt hostile infiltration to and from China. They had often suffered hits from small arms fire; on one occasion, a Mi-4 even returned to base with a poison-tipped arrow sticking in its undercarriage! The operational climax for the Mi-4s in IAF service came during the 1971 war, when it played a key role in the Indian Army's blitzkrieg-style advance to Dacca.

Whilst the 2 Corps battled its way from the western side, the 4 Corps thrust came from three directions in the east, across 155 miles (250 kilometre [km]) of border between East Pakistan and Meghalaya to the north, through to the Feni salient in the extreme south of Tripura. One column moved in from Silchar–Karimganj area towards Sylhet, another along the Akhura–Asjuganj axis and the third in the south with the objective of containing Comilla and cutting off Chittagong. Whilst battling against the two Pakistani divisions ranged against them, 4 Corps had to contend with the most formidable riverine terrain, criss-crossed by rivers and streams that make the area a logistic nightmare for any offensive action.

Supporting the advance was 110 HU, with 10 Mi-4s on strength and another two Mi-4s attached from 105 HU.⁶ Mi-4s were intimately involved in the spectacular progress made by the army, particularly by 8 Mountain Division. 110 HU transported troops, guns, ammunition and equipment, evacuated casualties and conducted reconnaissance for the field formations in the sector. On 7 December 1971, 254 troops were airlifted from Kailashahar to the Sylhet sector in the face of heavy ground fire. Next day, another 279 troops and 97 tonnes of equipment were airlifted from Kalaura, mostly at night. An additional 584 troops and 125 tonnes of supplies and nine field guns were lifted between 9 and 10 December to reinforce the build-up against Sylhet, which was held by the Pakistani 313 Brigade. The 110 HU then moved to Agartala for the heliborne operations from Brahmanbaria to Raipura.

The Mi-4s could be said to have forced the pace of the army's relentless drive, which now saw heliborne infantry leapfrogging past natural obstacles and enemy defences, with Gnats strafing and rocketing strongholds, in a textbook display of coordinated air power. The biggest operational task yet undertaken by the IAF's helicopter force was between 11 and 15 December. On 11 December, 1,350 troops and 19.2 tonnes

of equipment was airlifted from Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi, including in particular the lead battalion, 4/5 Gorkha Rifles of 59 Mtn Bgde, spearheading 8 Mountain Division's intrusion in Sylhet. The Gorkhas and their equipment were lifted across the Meghna River to south-east of Sylhet, forcing the much larger enemy force to abandon defences and, for fear of being cut off by the heliborne forces, pull back into the town.

Heliborne Operations

These operations are essentially troops being dropped behind enemy lines from a helicopter by landing, being light on wheels or from a hover. From 7 December onwards, helicopters began transporting troops, light guns, ammunition and fuel. In three days of operations, these helicopters had flown over 120 sorties to lift nearly 1,200 troops and 10 tonnes of load. Over 50 of these sorties were carried out by night. These operations facilitated the capture of Sylhet and certain other features in the same sector. Night movement of troops in large numbers caught the Pakistan Army by surprise. Besides fully armed troops in thousands, the load in hundreds of tonnes included RCL guns, gun shells and mortars, small arms ammunition and rations.

The IAF's small helicopter force could fairly claim credit for the speed of advance of the Indian Army in East Pakistan. It is well recognised and documented by the Indian Army that 110 HU was a key factor in the lightning campaign, where speed of advance was of the utmost importance. Two additional units worthy of special mention were 15 and 24 Squadrons, whose Gnats provided escorts to the heliborne operations and close support over the entire Brahmanbaria–Sylhet axis. Other Mi-4 and Alouette III units, including 112 HU in the Jessore sector, conducted casualty evacuation, communication and reconnaissance flights. Some Mi-4s and Alouette IIIs were equipped as gunships and operated in this role both in the east and the north-west of India, recalling their earlier role in 1965, when they hunted infiltrators with machine guns and anti-personnel bombs in Kashmir.

The Mukti Bahini Air Force

The birth of a 'Bangladesh Air Force' took place as 'Kilo Flight'. It was the Mukti Bahini's combat aviation formation, set up in October 1971, well in advance of the formal declaration of war in December. It consisted of one DHC-3 Otter plane and one Alouette III helicopter, both carrying rocket pods and machine guns for launching hit-and-

run attacks on Pakistani targets, and one DC-3 Dakota for logistical missions. Nine Bengali pilots and 58 ex-Pakistan Air Force personnel were trained and supported by Indian forces clandestinely. It trained at Dimapur in Nagaland, and this unit was the first to launch airstrikes on Pakistani targets in East Pakistan on 4 December 1971, by attacking oil depots at Narayanganj and Chittagong. After the war, it formed the core of the nascent Bangladesh Air Force.

It was on the night of 3 and 4 December that Otter aircraft of this air force attacked fuel dumps at Chittagong and an Alouette helicopter raided the fuel dumps at Narayanganj. Both the missions were successful. On 4 December, this Flight at Kailashahar airfield was placed at the disposal of GOC 8 Mountain Division, operating in the Maulvi Bazaar/Sylhet sector. The GOC demanded attacks by night on convoys, river barges and streamers on the Meghna, north of Bhairab Bazaar. The Flight flew five sorties between 4 and 7 December, hitting bunkers and troops concentrations at Maulvi Bazaar, and also destroyed two steamers and several 3-tonne trucks carrying troops.

Between 7 and 12 December, the Alouette helicopter was constantly and effectively used as an armed escort during the special helicopter operations at Sylhet, Raipura, Narsingdi and Baidya Bazaar. It engaged targets, as directed by the FAC, at night also. After the first night raid on Chittagong fuel dumps, Otter aircraft were utilised for armed escort/recce on a few missions only, in the same areas as the Alouette. The overall returns from this Flight were not very encouraging, perhaps because it had no definite tasks. Thus, the contribution of this Flight to the war effort was rather small. However, as far as raising the morale of the Mukti Bahini was concerned, it did serve the desired purpose. During the period of operations, the total flying effort of Kilo Flight was: Alouette, 77 sorties/68 hours; and Otter, 12 sorties/23 hours.

A HERCULEAN AND COLOURFUL EFFORT

The type-wise breakdown of helicopter effort under the command of HQ, Eastern Air Command (EAC), for conduct of air operations in the eastern theatre from 3 December to 17 December 1971 is given in Table 1.

The first-hand personal accounts of pilots who took part, as well as unit diaries of the time, truly bring out the dynamic and fast-changing issues that exemplify true jointness. These are gleaned from unit war diaries and personal accounts (written debriefs available in units and Air HQ).⁷ Some extracts from unit records of 110 HU are given next.

Table I Summary of Flying Effort: 3–17 December 1971

<i>Type of Aircraft</i>	<i>Sorties</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Load (tonne)</i>	<i>Troops Carried</i>	<i>Casualties Carried</i>
Mi-4	1,397	992:05	185.7	5,136	866
Alouette	894	726:35		809	282
Bell	113	84:00			31
Total	2,404	1,802:40	185.7	5,945	1,179

Source: Author's compilation from war diaries.

First-hand account (extracts) of Flight Lieutenant (Flt Lt) Pushp K. Vaid:

...But by the time I was going for my third trip it was already dark. Also the Pakistan army had seen the helicopters and started surrounding the field we were landing in and were firing at us as we came into land. On my third flight, I must have seen as many as five hundred bullets or more coming towards me. I couldn't count of course but they looked like a lot of bullets along with tracer bullets. Amazingly not one bullet hit us. I warned all others pilots to keep a look out and to reduce the time on the ground to minimum. We all finished our three trips and shut down for fuel at our bases. All of us checked our helicopters and not even one bullet had hit any helicopter.

While we were getting ready to start flying again, Group Captain Chandan Singh, who was in charge of the Air Force side, said that we won't fly at night and that we will start flying next morning. That really upset the army. They had not planned their soldiers or the ammunition or the food or the radio. They were not even sure of what or who had gone so far. All the helicopters had been filled up as the soldiers arrived with the idea that we will keep flying till everything had been moved. There was a big discussion between the army and the 110 HU supervisors. Eventually, after nearly three hours, it was decided that one helicopter will go, and if it came back the others will be sent...After the sortie, at base we discovered that the cable to the fuel gauge had been hit. This was mended and then we continued flying with the rest of the helicopters right through the night till we had dropped the entire brigade at Sylhet.⁸

Account of wartime activity by Air Commodore (Air Cmde) C.M.Singla (Retd):

...At Dimapur, I was asked to pick up an armed Chetak from Tezpur which had just been modified by and airlifted from BRD. It had one

rocket pod on either side and each pod carried seven rockets. These could be fired in pairs or in salvo. In addition, on the helicopter floor, a twin barrel machine gun was mounted.

...Then onwards, we operated as self contained and mobile hitting outfit. We moved frequently to support troops as they advanced. I was ordered to fly in command on all armed missions. On one night, troops were to be inducted by Mi-4 helicopters. I was to give air cover. The Forward Air Controller told me on R/T that he was my pupil at Bidar. Our effective rocket firing over several missions that night was witnessed by a senior officer who flew as a passenger with us initially. Being an unstable platform, in our dive to aim and engage targets with rockets pairs, we had to come pretty low and close to the targets. We took some bullet hits that night. Subsequently, we hit & burnt ammunition trucks, boats ferrying troops by night and enemy concentrations. The helicopter had now got pierced by bullets all over. The engineers did a good job of repairs and despite vibrations etc. we remained operational throughout the war.⁹

Extract from 110 HU War Diary:

On 16th December 1971, Flight Lieutenant Ravindra Vikram Singh (9524) Flying (Pilot) was flying the C-in-C and Chief of Staff of Bangladesh with other passengers to Sylhet. At a height of 1 km, his aircraft was hit by enemy ground fire at 1720hrs, where one bullet, after piercing the cabin injured the Chief of Staff of Bangladesh, hit an oil pipe, and resulted in leak of hot oil into the cabin. Pulling up immediately to 1.5 km of height, he checked that the reductor oil pressure had started dropping to zero giving limited time for action. It was by then dark and returning back to base or to any other airfield was impossible. He manoeuvred out of enemy area, selected a suitable field at Fenchuganj after approximately 15 minutes flying under trying circumstances in complete darkness and made a successful landing saving the aircraft and lives of C-in-C and chief of Staff of Bangladesh along with other passengers and crew.¹⁰

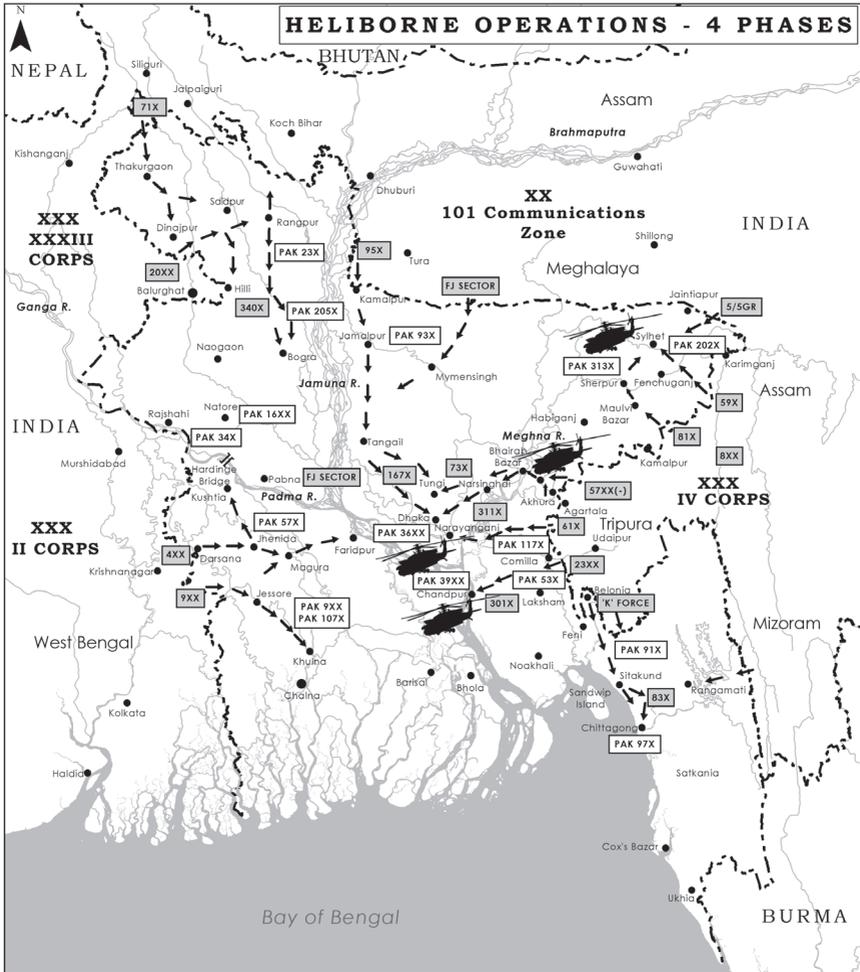
110 HU's Legacy

The 110 HU was raised on 19 February 1962 with Mi-4 helicopters at Tezpur. During the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, within a brief period of 12 days, it was instrumental in demonstrating the flexibility of air power by successfully undertaking the first-ever SHBO in war. It was utilised for 'vertical envelopment' extensively and carried out the famous Heli-bridging operations in which the Indian Army was moved with

creditable swiftness that finally brought a formidable enemy to his knees. The relentless operations changed the face of the tactical battle area in the theatre of operations (east of Dacca) in East Pakistan. The SHBO missions contributed majorly to the most decisive liberation campaign ever in military history. A depiction of the progress of SHBO (north to south) is given in Map 1.

An extract from 110 HU War Diary gives further clarity:

It had been assessed at higher formations that Sylhet town, a district and communication centre, was an important place from the



© GIS Section, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (MP-IDSA). Map not to scale.

Map I Heliborne Operations-4 Phases

military point of view and its fall would inflict a severe setback to Pakistan Army. Thus, HQ 4 Corps tasked 4/5 Gorkha Rifles of 59 Mountain Brigade to capture Sylhet and inducted Mi-4 helicopters of 110 HU to undertake SHBO missions to accomplish the ground plan. The main task was to heli-lift a battalion (4/5 GR) to Mirpara (outskirts of Sylhet) to secure the railway bridge over river Surma and occupy Sylhet airport/radio station to further operations. The challenges for the Unit helicopters did not end with Sylhet and the Unit was subsequently tasked to undertake extensive SHBO missions for furtherance of corps objectives as the battle progressed from different axes at Raipura, Narsingdi and Baidya Bazar.

10 Dec 1971—Raipura (SHBO). The 4 Corps Commander decided not to stop on the east bank of the Meghna River but to get across if possible to Dacca. The bridge across River Meghna was blown up and it was left to the helicopters to heli-bridge a sizeable force across the river. The operation to cross River Meghna began shortly before last light on 10 Dec 71 when about 100 troops were ferried to landing pads. By the time the second wave of helicopters arrived it was quite dark but the helicopters landed safely. The movement of troops continued throughout the night and the next day. Though the normal capacity of Mi-4s was to carry 14 troops, the number of troops was increased to 23 men per trip.

11 Dec 1971—Narsingdi (SHBO). The Unit was given the biggest task of SHBO when eight helicopters of 110 HU were moved to Narsingdi from Brahmanbaria. By 0730 hrs every helicopter had done three sorties each. After refuelling at Agartala the second wave took off at 0900 Hr and carried out three sorties each. Two more details were flown. In all, a total of 834 troops and 58,600 kg of load were airlifted on 11 Dec 71 involving 99 sorties. More sorties could have been carried out but the Army could not cope up with the swiftness with which the SHBO was carried out.

12 Dec 1971. 35 sorties were carried out at Narsingdi, airlifting 234 troops and 18,520 kg of load. Due to heavy ground fire, there were 30 casualties and one helicopter was sent to Sylhet for evacuation of these casualties. One helicopter met with an accident due to fire in air.

13 Dec 1971. 282 troops and 14,850 kg of load were airlifted in 30 sorties on 13 Dec 1971. On 14th, 12 helicopters were positioned at Daudkandi early morning where they were employed to move a battalion of troops across the River Meghna to Baidya Bazar, barely seven miles from Narayanganj on the outskirts of Dacca. By evening 810 troops and 22,650 kg of load were airlifted in 79

sorties. From the time that the SHBO operations into Narsinghdi began on 10 Dec evening, till the landing of a battalion at Baidya Bazar, the pilots had already flown for 36 hours continuously, doing 409 sorties.

15 Dec 1971. SHBO missions continued and 1209 troops and 38,100 kg of load were airlifted to Baidya Bazar. One aircraft met with an accident but the morale of the Unit continued to be high. The next day, most helicopters were taken up for maintenance and inspection. One helicopter which was sent to Sylhet for casualty evacuation airlifted 16 casualties while two other helicopters were utilised for Army communication sorties during the day. In the evening five helicopters took part in the Dacca Surrender Ceremony.

SHBO and Casualty Evacuation (Casevac) Missions Flown by 110 HU in December 1971

Table 2 Summary of SHBO by 110 HU

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Mission</i>	<i>Sorties</i>	<i>No. of Troops</i>	<i>Total Load (kg)</i>
1.	SHBO Sylhet	66	1,117	22,600
2.	SHBO Raipura	57	650	10,400
3.	SHBO Narsingdi	164	1,350	91,950
4.	SHBO Baidya Bazaar	200	2,019	60,750
5.	Casevac	–	269	–
6.	Total	487	5,136	1,85,700 (185.7 tonne)

Source: Extracted from 110 HU War Records.

As is evident from Table 2, 110 HU was an integral part of the 1971 operations east of Dacca. The Mi-4 helicopters undertook extensive Heli-bridging operations in the riverine-dominated terrain of East Pakistan where all the major bridges had been blown up by the enemy. These operations were led ably by the Commanding Officer (CO) of 110 HU, Squadron Leader (Sqn Ldr) C.S. Sandhu. He was later awarded the Vir Chakra for leading these pioneer SHBO missions in war. The enormity of the task undertaken can be judged from the fact that almost 500 sorties were flown in the direct face of enemy fire during these operations.

A DEEPER ANALYSIS OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Gen Sagat, the Unpredictable

In late November 1961, in operations for liberation of Goa, 50 Parachute Brigade, which Sagat was commanding, was tasked to execute a subsidiary

thrust from the north. However, his brilliance and out-of-the-box ideas took over soon. Hostilities at Goa began on 17 December 1961, when a unit of Indian troops attacked and occupied the town of Maulinguém in the north-east, killing two Portuguese soldiers. On the morning of 18 December, Sagat moved the brigade into Goa in three columns: 2 Para advanced towards the town of Ponda in central Goa; 1 Para advanced towards Panaji; and the main thrust of the attack—comprising 2 Sikh LI as well as an armoured division—advanced on Tivim.

Although the 50 Para Brigade was charged with merely assisting the main thrust conducted by 17 Infantry Division, its units moved rapidly across minefields, roadblocks and four riverine obstacles to be the first to reach the capital of Panjim on 19 December 1961. The brigade achieved objectives much beyond its initial purview. On entering the capital, Sagat famously ordered his troops to remove their steel helmets and wear the Parachute Regiment's maroon berets.

Again, as a Major General commanding 17 Mountain Division in Sikkim on the Sino-Indian border, he and his division performed in unexpected and brilliant ways during the Nathu La and Cho La clashes, achieving a decisive tactical advantage after defeating the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This included bypassing of higher instructions and use of barbed wire and artillery without permission. However, these were precisely the issues that gave the PLA a bloody nose and something to think about. In his stint as GOC 101 Communication Zone in Shillong, he oversaw the operations in Mizoram, which included SHBO of special troops in IAF Mi-4 helicopters.

It is unfortunate that Gen Sagat did not have the best of relations with either the Army Commander, Lt Gen Aurora, his immediate superior, or with the Army Chief, Gen Sam Manekshaw. In fact, Gen S.K. Sinha, in a foreword to Maj Gen Randhir Singh's book, compares Sagat's fate to that of Patton for the unfair treatment by his army and government.¹¹ Dacca was not spelt out as an objective of the Indian operations by Army HQ. Gen S.K. Sinha writes, 'From the very beginning he[Sagat] had set his eyes on Dacca and made preparations for it.'¹²

Every Constraint to Tie Down Sagat

In the pre-1962 Indian Army, where conventional thinking straitjacketed the military thought process, Sagat's approach was so exceptional and 'out-of-the-box' that his boldness and savoir faire were considered more of an aberration.¹³ Gen Aurora was an adherent of the direct approach

and disliked Sagat's propensity for risk-taking. It is only in the pre-war battles under Sagat, especially after the Battle of Dholai, that the level of casualties convinced Aurora of the value of bypassing fortified positions. These pre-war incursions helped Sagat in not only assessing enemy capabilities but also indoctrinating his primarily counter-insurgency troops. By end November, Sagat had a clear blueprint in his mind, but did not share it with the higher commanders. Closer to the 'Meghna Heli-bridge' dates, he was extremely reticent and non-communicative with Gen Aurora. In fact, in a documented conversation between the two on 7 December, Aurora asserted his 'No Dacca', but to no avail as Sagat launched the biggest operation of the war, the Meghna Air Bridge, on 9 December.¹⁴

Besides the mental constraints, there were numerous restrictions placed on 4 Corps. First, the troops were mostly 'light' from insurgency action areas. They were highly inadequate in transport, artillery and engineering resources. In a terrain of highly riverine morass, it made campaigning almost impossible. Second, the mandate restricted Sagat to only containing or isolating Comilla, Chittagong, Sylhet, and to secure Agartala. Nothing beyond east bank of Meghna was allowed by Eastern Command's operational instructions. Third, on ceding to his relentless demand for helicopters, 4 Corps was allotted 110 HU with its ageing Mi-4 helicopters. Even then, only a company drop was authorised. Another issue was that barely a few pilots were trained to fly by night. To top that, most troops taking part in SHBO were seeing a helicopter for the first time. Finally, because of the distances, 4 Corps hardly got any air support, and this stepped up only after 11 December when everyone realised that Dacca was within reach.¹⁵ Gnats were moved to Agartala to provide direct support, which they did effectively. In a nutshell, Army HQ and Eastern Command of Indian Army had done all they could to 'fix' Sagat's corps east of Meghna River.

Even before the Sylhet operations from 4 December onwards, close air support was denied to 4 Corps due to other priorities. Air Chief Marshal (ACM) P.C. Lal notes in his book, 'Air attacks against defended positions produced little damage, but they had considerable psychological effect.'¹⁶ The biggest contributor to morale and effective higher guidance were the hundreds of recce sorties by helicopters, tens of landings in forward locations by Sagat himself and his almost daily face-to-face with commanders in thick of action. Many helicopters took enemy hits, including Sagat's own IAF pilot and helicopter. Very

importantly, this allowed him to have an accurate situational awareness and grasp windows of opportunities.

The start was the seizure of Sylhet by the gallant 4/5 Gurkhas.

The first Special Heli-Borne Operation of the Indian Army was not a pre-planned operation. It just popped up, out of nowhere and was executed exceptionally well by a small team of 10 Mi-4 helicopters. The operation was a brain child of the legendary Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Sagat Singh who saw a small window of opportunity to tie down enemy forces in Sylhet town of East Pakistan and subsequent capture of the town.¹⁷

By 14 December, Sagat was successful in moving 73 Brigade, 301 Brigade, 311 Brigade and Shafiullah's 'S' Force across the Meghna, giving 4 Corps two clear short approaches to Dacca. This was the coup de grace, just as the Sylhet feint and debacle had unsettled Niazi's centre of gravity.

If a truly objective review is done chronologically to decipher what really made Dacca fall in December 1971 and create a new nation of Bangladesh, the honours would undoubtedly go to the manoeuvring chaos engineered by Lt Gen Sagat Singh commanding 4 Corps. Unfortunately, just as the Army Chief and Eastern Command GOC of that time brushed this under the carpet because of their dislike for this larger-than-life persona, military historians, barring a very few, have also chosen to do the same.

In the process, the courage, innovation and sheer boldness of helicopter pilots and aircrew of the IAF remains an untold story. As this narrative progresses, there will be little doubt left that it was this teaming of a brilliant but maverick general and IAF's helicopter pilots that unnerved Gen Niazi and upset the Pakistani centre of gravity in the east.

Helicopter Contribution Played Down

ACM Lal's book, *My Years with the IAF*, is the most popular and authentic narration of IAF's contribution in various operations.¹⁸ Yet, the account seems to downplay the achievements of helicopters in them. For example, when writing about the 1962 war, the book just briefly mentions how the fleet was raised, and also gives a cursory account of downing of Sahgal's helicopter by the Chinese. A vast contribution in then North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and Ladakh (for example, Galwan resupply) is completely missed out.

Similarly, in the 1965 war write-up, ACM Lal painstakingly documents all fighter and transport aircraft operations, but completely omits the Herculean effort of helicopters in general, and Mi-4s based in Srinagar in particular. The Mi-4s were modified in a record time of a week to the armed role with frontguns and bomb racks in the cargo cabin. Almost 80 sorties of interdicting Razakars were done in operations starting three months before war broke out. This invaluable support finds a worthy mention in a book by Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh (Retd).¹⁹

While Lal does mention SHBO in 1971 under Gen Sagat, it seems more of an effort to bring out the fact that jointmanship worked because, as a paratrooper, he understood air power capabilities and limitations. It must be remembered that Sagat's track record of dynamism was documented starting from liberation of Goa, Sikkim (1965–67) against the Chinese to the Mizo operations (SHBO). He was not an original paratrooper but was given the command of the para brigade directly. Perhaps ACM Lal's omissions are understandable in light of the fact that he expired before the book could be put together. It was compiled by Mrs Ila Lal, with advice and vetting by senior IAF officers.

Gen Sagat's creativity, high situational awareness and grounded understanding came from his innate qualities of vision and forward thinking, along with ample risk propensity. Even during the SHBO episode, there are ample instances of Sagat bulldozing his way through the maze of IAF rules and regulations and having his way. This was his very nature, focused on goals and thinking many steps ahead of everyone else.

While the Tangail paradrop is claimed as India's biggest and most successful such operation, it must be correctly placed in its contribution to the creation of Bangladesh. It was carried out on 11 December to interdict the access to Dacca from Mymensingh, essentially to isolate the brigade there and stopping reinforcements to Dacca. By this time, Gen Niazi had already been unnerved by Sagat's confounding manoeuvring with heliborne forces at multiple points. Between 9 and 10 December, the Meghna air bridge and river crossings were well accomplished. The damage to the core of Niazi's fortress strategy was done.

More importantly, Tangail had a completely friendly population and was dominated by resistance fighters, which ensured full cooperation and no risks. There was no air or ground opposition. The date of 11th is contextual as the morale of Pakistan forces was at rock bottom. Therefore, when taken in the overall context, the airborne operations were a sideshow in comparison to the SHBO across Meghna River.

Another issue in playing down the contribution of COs and pilots of helicopter units is the IAF's singular focus on the role of Group Captain Chandan Singh, a transport aircraft pilot and station commander in Jorhat. He was deputed to raise the nascent Bangladesh Air Force with Otters, Dakotas and an armed Alouette. He first met Sagat on 3 December, well after CO 110 HU (at Kumbhigram) had planned the Sylhet SHBO with Gen Sagat. In fact, before the formal war, on 29 November, 110 HU had carried out SHBO north of Rangamati to interdict fleeing Mizo National Front cadres. Around the same time, Pakistan Army too had carried out SHBO with its special forces to counter Indian action in Belonia Bulge. Chandan joined the SHBO fray only on 7 December at the execution phase.

Despite being central to the victory, the 'bosses' decided that minimum visibility should be given to helicopter pilots during the surrender ceremony. In the words of Pushp Vaid, flight commander of 110 HU: 'I was told that pilots not needed for flying duties should be left behind. However I ignored the instructions—I reasoned that after risking their lives and flying to their limit, my pilots and flight engineers deserved to see this once-in-a-lifetime surrender ceremony.' Maj Gen Randhir Singh, talking of the final surrender ceremony at Dacca, claims: 'The young pilots, so much instrumental in creating this history had left only one of their colleagues to guard the helicopters.'²⁰ Flt Lt Krishnamurthy clutched an outraged Gen Jacob while peering over his left shoulder to witness the signing of the surrender in the iconic photograph. It actually aptly summed up who the real architects of the victory were, and efforts to deny their legacy. The Ministry of Defence's official history of the war covers 'Heli-bridging' in two pages in chapter 14 (pp. 607, 608), but devotes the rest 27 pages to operations by fighter aircraft.²¹

Was Dacca ever an objective? The official history debates this extensively and clearly states a play-safe approach with no formal orders.²² It is clear that the actions by Gen Sagat Singh caused a major crisis in the mind of Gen Niazi, and the attendant fallout thereafter. In fact, in the closing chapter of the official history of the 1971 war, it is unambiguously stated:

Sagat Singh in particular stood out as a General any army could be proud of, not only because he had the largest Corps to handle over the longest front but also because he surmounted the stiffest obstacles of the Meghna and Lakhya rivers. A close look at the capture of Dacca, thus makes the exploit shine brighter than ever.²³

CONCLUSION

Adapting in the ‘Fog of War’

Adaptability in battle has two faces: the ability to sense a change in situation demanding a change in response; and the ability to commit to that requirement. What does complexity leadership entail in terms of fast-changing or asymmetric warfare? The Australian Army replaced the famous orient, observe, decide and act (OODA) loop with an act, sense, decide and adapt (ASDA) loop that deals better with non-linear, complex and unpredictable states. In the ASDA cycle, action is first because in uncertainty, one needs to prod to elicit a requisite response for assessments to be made. Decisions are made based on these assessments, followed by deeper reflection and adaptation. However, the situation prevailing for decisions to be taken will dictate what to apply, that is, OODA, ASDA or something else.²⁴

The 1971 war is illustrative. ‘Dacca was never an objective even in the final operational instruction by Army HQ to Eastern Command.’²⁵ However, the famous probes by Mi-4s, ordered by Gen Sagat Singh of 4 Corps, caused chaos and a fateful decision by Gen Niazi to defend Sylhet by two brigades rather than defending Meghna River crossings towards Dacca. It allowed 4 Corps to reach the doorsteps of Dacca days earlier than thought to be possible. Deeper reflection allowed the Indian Army to quickly go for the jugular and reach the doorsteps of Dacca. This example of mental flexibility and agility is not unique; it is ever-present in battlefields with the victors.

Helicopters in general, and Mi-4s in particular, stood out as game changers in the 1971 war. More importantly, it was open minds and the pervasive spirit of jointmanship that really achieved much more than just the additive totals of capabilities of the services. Achieving air superiority over the entire East Pakistan enabled the Indian Army and the IAF to do the unthinkable, namely, help liberate Bangladesh.

NOTES

1. Rajesh Isser, ‘Game Changing Helicopter Employment’, in Anil Chopra (ed.), *The 1971 Indo-Pak Air War*, New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2021, pp. 165–82.
2. I. Cardozo, ‘The Battle for Sylhet’, *Scholar Warrior*, Spring 2020, pp. 98–105.

3. R. Isser, 'Asymmetric Competition ahead for Indian Air Power', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January–March 2021, pp. 1–24.
4. R. Isser, *The Purple Legacy: IAF Helicopters in Service of the Nation*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012, pp. 63–64.
5. J.F.R. Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1997, pp. 129–32.
6. P.C. Lal, *My Years with the IAF*, New Delhi: Lancer, 1986, pp. 207–16.
7. Isser, *The Purple Legacy*, n. 4, pp. 81–83.
8. Debrief of Flt Lt P. Vaid in War Diary, 110 HU, extracted by the author, December 2012.
9. Personal account of Air Cmde C.M. Singhla, Files Air HQ, October 2012.
10. 110 HU War Diary, extracted in December 2012 by author.
11. Randhir Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh*, New Delhi: Vij Books India/United Service Institution of India, 2013. Foreword by Lt Gen S.K. Sinha (Retd).
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 69.
14. Ibid., p. 161.
15. H. Massand, 'Offensive Air Operations in the Eastern Theatre', in Chopra (ed.), *The 1971 Indo-Pak Air War*, n. 1, p. 101.
16. Lal, *My Years with the IAF*, n. 6, p. 211.
17. Sumit Walia, '1971 War: Battle of Sylhet—The First Special Heli Borne Operation', *Indian Defence Review*, 18 December 2019, available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/1971-war-battle-of-sylhet-the-first-special-heli-borne-operation/>, accessed on 5 September 2021.
18. Lal, *My Years with the IAF*, n. 6.
19. Harbaksh Singh, *War Dispatches: The Story of the Indian Army's Western Command*, New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991.
20. Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh*, n. 11, p. 9.
21. Ministry of Defence, *The Official History of the 1971 Indo-Pak War*, pp. 592–618.
22. Ibid., pp. 789–92.
23. Ibid., p. 792.
24. R. Isser, 'Is Indian Airpower Preparing for Tomorrow's War?', *VIF Brief*, August 2019, p. 14, available at www.vifindia.org, accessed on 1 November 2020.
25. Lal, *My Years with the IAF*, n. 6, pp. 207–16.