



# Naval commandos'role in the war of liberation

COMMANDO MD KHALILUR RAHMAN

WITH a view to making the war extensive and forceful, Gen Osmani divided the whole of the war field into eleven sectors. Excluding the sector No 10 all other sectors were placed under the command of some such persons who were designated as Major and had joined the war deserting the Pakistan Army. All the water-ways, coastal areas and the sea ports of Chalna, Chittagong comprised the Sector No 10. It was then known as the Naval Sector, and under the direct Command of Indian Navy.

The object of the formation of the forces of Naval Commandos was to destroy the enemy ships and other vessels; and to make the whole of our water ways quite unsafe for their flight and supply of arms and ammunition etc.

It was very difficult to resist the easy movement of the occupying army in our water ways. Because, there were neither considerable naval persons nor any gun boat at the disposal of the Freedom Fighters. Under these circumstances, Gen M A G Osmani took the decision of forming a force of Naval Commandos. In response to his proposal the Indian Naval Command sent two teams to select personnel for Naval Commandos from the different training camps of Freedom Fighters located in Assam, Tripura and West Bengal. They, however, selected 310 Freedom Fighters for the purpose and sent them for training to Plassey near the river Vagirathi in the district of Murshidabad. This is the very Plassey where the bright sun of our independence set through the defeat of Nawab Siraj-Ud-Daula to the British rulers in 1757. A training camp was established for the training of the Commandos on the bank of Vagirathi, at one end of the historic war field, Plassey. The symbolic name of this camp was CAMP "C-2P".

The training began with the first batch of Naval Commandos consisting of the 8 submariners, 310 Freedom Fighters and 8 naval persons who escaped from Pakistan Navy. In the inaugural function of Naval Commando training at the monumental square of Plassey Indian Naval Commando Officer Lt Cdr G M Martish delivered a grave speech welcoming the Commandos in English. The English version of his speech was interpreted by submariner AW Chowdhury, Bir Uttom.

In consideration of the significance of the role of Naval Commandos they were then designated as "Suicidal Squad." Inspired with the psychological influence of the monument of Plassey, that vast historic war field and, above all, with patriotism the Naval Commandos on that day signed on the suicidal bond. How hard and tiresome that training was! The trainees had to undergo training sixteen hours per day. Unarmed combat, throwing of hand grenades, explosive demolition, use of sten gun and limpet mine and swimming with the help of Pins, were included in the items of their training. It was, as if, to finish training of ten years in ten days.

The Camp Commander Capt M N Sumanath, Training Commander Lt Cdr G M Martish, Demolition Instruction Officer Lt Samir Kumar Das, 12 Indian JCO's, 8 Bengali submariners were the trainers of the Commandos. The training of the first batch of the Commandos ended on the 3rd August

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'71. Admiral Nanda, Brig Saber Singh of India, Gen Osmani and Tajuddin, the then Acting Prime Minister of Bangladesh, were present during the passing out ceremony of the first batch of the Naval Commandos. Commandos were now deployed to run operations at diverse ports of Chittagong, Chalna, Mongla, Chandpur and Narayanganj. At the event of the crossing the border one limpet mine, a light gun for self-defence, a pair of pins were given to each of the Commandos and a high frequency transistor was also given to each group with the instruction to listen to Akash Bani, Calcutta every evening in order to have the signal of action and to hit the enemy. They were told: "When you hear the song Amar Putul ajke jabe shashur bari then you must mean that you are ordered to be ready for action. When you hear the song "Aami tomay shuneachilam jata gaan tar badale aami chaini kono protidan" then you must mean that you are asked to hit." At 7 pm on 13th August '71 when the certain frequency was turned on there came the desired melody of the song from Akash Bani, Calcutta. The Commandos got ready for action as they were directed. On the following day (14th August) the Commandos had the ultimate signal of hitting the enemy ships at different ports.

It was dark and deep night, there was silence all around. The sentries were half asleep or dozing on the deck of ships or vessels. The current of rivers were in their usual flow. In such a moment of the nature the Commandos plunged into the rivers simultaneously fastening a limpet mine with their chests, and, at the risk of their own lives, they stuck the mines with their targeted ships and then fled away to safe distance. In the small hours of the 15th August the mines began to burst destroying the enemy ships with such thunderous sounds that trembled the whole of the atmosphere. As a result MV "Al-Abbas, MV Hormuz, MV Burma Javed, MV Saptalinga, MV USS Lightening, Oriental Barge No 6, MV O Ram, MV Mahtab Javed, MV Morteja, MV Issueurk and many other big and small ships sank in the rivers gradually. These very operations were then known as "Operation Jackpot". The operations run by the Naval Commandos on different nights of

September also, but not of course "Jackpot" as first. Action September i.e. the 2nd and 3rd operations were run throughout the whole area under sector No 10. These were in September and October run in all the small and big rivers and sea ports of the country.

The operations of the Naval Commandos were so effectively crushing that the Dainik Purbadesh was bound to flash news admitting the heavy loss inflicted by the destructive operations of the Commandos. The news of these operations were even published as headlines on the first pages of almost all distinguished newspapers of the west. With this, the struggling people of Bangladesh specially the Freedom Fighters got indomitable inspiration for fighting with more sanguinity. They became sure of their success within a short time. On the contrary, the morale of the barbarous hordes and their associates broke down. The war of liberation then took an extensive turn. The Commandos were highly appreciated throughout the world for their unprecedented role. The waterways then became quite dangerous for transportation.

In this context Rafiqul Islam, Bir Uttam remarked in his esteemed book "A Tale of Millions" the operation "Jackpot" run by the Naval Commandos in the small hours of 15th August caused a heavy shake in the conscience of the world communities. Immediately after that came a revolutionary change in our War of Liberation.

Rear Admiral Mehir K Roy of Indian Navy also commented in his renowned book entitled "The War in the Indian Ocean" that the role of the Naval Commandos in the War of Liberation in Bangladesh was a milestone.

In the meantime, many other naval soldiers escaped from Pakistan Navy and joined the war of liberation while fighting under different sector commanders, they, at one stage, seized six naval crafts and with the help of these crafts they successfully drove some noteworthy operations in the coastal areas of the country. At that time the exiled Govt of Bangladesh collected two tug-boats namely, Ajoya and Akshaya, from the Indian Govt on the 9th Nov '71. These two boats were handed over to some naval personnel

at the Garden Reach dock yard of Calcutta. They turned them into gunboats by setting 40/60 buffer guns and named them "Padma" and "Palash". Soon after the bombardment by Pakistan at Amritsar in India on 3rd Dec '71, the Indian government recognised Bangladesh and the total scene of the war changed then and there. Having formed allied forces the Indian Army and the Freedom Fighters jointly attacked the occupying forces. In the face of fierce and irresistible attack of the joint forces the Pak troops began to retreat from almost all the places. Having heard the news of the retreat of Pak troops from Jessore to Khulna on the 6th December '71, the "Padma" and "Palash" proceeded to Khulna from the port Haldia in Midnapore. They were then backed by INS Panval, a gun boat of Indian Navy. All these three gun boats were under direct command of Capt Sumanth. In this operation there were 41 Bangladeshi Naval personnel, eight Naval Commandos and six Indian sailors. When at 12 o'clock on the 10th December '71 the gun boats "Padma", "Palash" and "Panvel" stealthily reached near the shipyard of Khulna, there appeared three bombers high in the sky. The naval soldiers then sought permission from their Commander Capt Sumanth to fire the planes. But Capt Sumanth did not give permission, because he was sure that the planes were of Indian Air Force. Just then the planes flew down and coming very near the gun boats started bombing on them. Capt Sumanth directed the force personnel to leave the boats immediately. As a result of the bombardment M V Padma was destroyed and sank in the river. Some of the naval personnel including naval commandos were either martyred or seriously injured. All of those who escaped death jumped into the river for life except Ruhul Amin, the Engine Room Artificer. He hurried to the engine room with a view to saving the boat from immeasurable damage at the risk of his life. Within a few minutes the bombing fighters again came back and bombed on the "Palash" of Ruhul Amin. At this, the left hand of Ruhul Amin was blown off. With only one hand Ruhul Amin was able to take the "Palash" to the bank of the river, while his left arms was profusely bleeding. Seeing the boat sinking Ruhul Amin got down from the boat on to the bank. As an irony of fate, there were already some Rajakers on the bank. As soon as the Rajakers saw Ruhul Amin they made a brush fire at his head. Six bullets of the Rajakers smashed his head. Not only Ruhul Amin but also Mohibullah, Akhter, Farid, Daulat, Naval Commandos Rafique, Aftab, Amin and Siraj embraced martyrdom on that day.

Through such immeasurable sacrifices and dedications of the Freedom Fighters and the peoples we achieved our glorious Freedom and Independent Bangladesh.

Author is Director, Bangladesh Muktiyoddah Naval Commando Welfare & Research Council



Freedom fighters crossing a river to a front



Freedom fighters in action at a front.

# Memories of the war

M AFTABUDDIN SHAH

THE independence of Bangladesh did not come the easy way. It was not presented to us as a gift on a silver platter. We had to snatch it from the Pakistanis, fighting a bloody war. Although there are instances of periodic and localised wars fought by numerous Bangalee heroes against foreign occupiers in the past, there has been nothing like the all-out people's war fought by the Bangalees against the Pakistanis in 1971.

The war was however not one of our choosing. We wanted to settle all disputed issues with the Pakistanis peacefully, while Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan. In the first-ever general election of Pakistan in 1970, the Awami League, led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, emerged as the largest political party of the country, with an absolute majority in the upcoming National Assembly. After the election, it should have been the duty for the Pakistani military junta to convene the National Assembly and ask Bangabandhu to form the next government as the leader of the majority party. But the Pakistanis, although in a minority numerically, were conditioned to dominating the majority Bangalees and were not prepared to accept their governance. They began foot-dragging and backstage manoeuvres to deny the Bangalees the fruit of their electoral victory. As a sequence to their evil design, Yahia Khan announced the postponement of the sitting of the Assembly scheduled for 3rd June 1971.

This was, however, not the first time that the Pakistanis refused to treat the Bangalees on same footing. Following the creation of Pakistan, for which the Bangalees had made a major contribution, the Urdu was imposed as the only state language of Pakistan to the elimination of Bangla, the language of the majority. The Bangalees had to fight and sacrifice lives to secure the recognition of Bangla. In 1954, the Jukta Front, a combine of pro-Bangalee political parties, had won a victory in the then East Pakistan provincial election. But the Pakistanis did not allow them to govern.

As we celebrate anniversary of our independence, we must remember that our independence was not a feat of serendipity and there is a sad and melancholy side to it. We had to fight a bitter and savage war, costing us an ocean of blood. It has been justly said that if blood is the price of independence, Bangladesh has overpaid it! While the first emotion of 26th March will always be of joy and triumph in the great event that immortalises the day, the second will be one of loving and tender recollection of those who fell before the enemy's bullets during the war.

In 1958, Ayub Khan, the Pakistani Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces declared martial law to thwart the holding of Pakistan's first general election scheduled for February 1959. Ayub continued to rule as the dictator. Bangalees realised that without a democratic polity, they would never be able to have a say in the governance of Pakistan. With this aim in view, they stepped up their struggle for a democratic system and rose in a mass uprising in 1969, forcing Ayub to step down.

With the departure of Ayub, Yahya Khan, as the head of the armed forces, took over the control of Pakistan and declared himself president. In response to the burning popular feeling of the day, Yahya went for a general election in late-1970, in which Awami League emerged as the party with an absolute majority.

Rather than handing over power to the Awami League, Yahya postponed the convening of the National Assembly. The postponement of the convening of the National Assembly acted like a flame thrown into a tinderbox. The entire country burst into unprecedented wrath. In defiance of the Pakistani rule, millions took to the streets and burned the Pakistani flag.

Bangabandhu launched his famous non-cooperation movement and

completely paralysed the military administration in the then East Pakistan. In response to these developments, Yahya flew in to Dhaka and engaged in so-called negotiation with Bangabandhu, ostensibly to seek a way out of the crisis. But the Bangalees knew quite well that this was another Pakistani ploy. The apprehension of Bangabandhu proved to be true, and the Pakistanis unleashed their savage military machinery upon the Bangalees on the night of 25th March 1971.

Within hours, countless men, women and children lay dead and wounded. Thousands of homes, hearths, shops and academic and other buildings were on fire. The booms of Pakistani tanks and other deadly weapons filled the skies of Dhaka with deafening sounds. The East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and the police stations were attacked and razed to the ground. The air of Dhaka began to reverberate with human shrieks and cries. The Bangalees were dishied out the real taste of a Pakistana-made doomsday. By unleashing a policy of indiscriminate death and destruction, the Pakistanis sought to teach the Bangalees a lesson, and at the same time, terrorise them to come to terms as per their dictates. The second aim of the Pakistanis was to forestall the prospect of another Bangalee irredentism for a long time to come.

But alas, things did not go the way the Pakistanis had hoped. Even though Bangabandhu was arrested on the same night, the hope for independence spread all over the country. The Bangalee members of the armed forces, the EPR, and the police spontaneously revolted against the Pakistani regime.

Students, teachers, labourers, and people from all other backgrounds began to overflow the camps set up to impart military training to the freedom fighters. Admittedly, the superior training, weaponry and preparedness of the Pakistani forces gave them an edge over our freedom fighters at the initial stages. But patriotism, determination and above all confidence in the inevitability of their victory soon enabled the freedom fighters to get the upper hand. Although without the benefit of comprehensive training, the freedom fighters proved worthy in what they were doing. The enemy was badly mauled and manhandled on each front, forcing them to depend on continued reinforcements from West Pakistan. The young and ardent volunteers fought so well that they soon earned the admiration abroad. The military commander of the defeated Pakistani forces has recently admitted that they had lost the war not to the Indian forces, but to the Bangalee freedom fighters helped by the Indian troops.

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MAftabuddin Shah is former Managing Director of an insurance company