



BATTLE OF MAHALCHORI

Remembering Shaheed Captain Aftab Qader Bir Uttam

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR BIR PROTIK

SINCE 26 March 1971, Pakistan Army units were conducting extensive operations against Mukti Bahini positions all over Bangladesh. Their eyes were on Mukti Bahini positions towards Ramgarh, a bordering thana in Rangamati district. In order to protect Ramgarh, Mukti Bahini had taken up defence in Mahalchori area. From early April, Mukti Bahini's operations were being directed from Ramgarh. Ramgarh and surrounding places were liberated areas till the fourth week of April and Pakistan Army desperately wanted to capture these areas.

In order to take control of Ramgarh, Pakistan Army engaged troops to advance through a number of axes including Mirerswarai, Korerhat, Hathhazari, Nazirhat-Hiako and Rangamati-Mahalchori routes. On the other hand, after winding up the defence, a part of 8 East Bengal Regiment (EBR) along with soldiers of East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and volunteers comprising of mainly students reached Mahalchori through Kaptai and Rangamati. It was decided to take position in Mahalchori area to prevent the Pakistan Army from capturing Ramgarh. Major Mir Shawkat Ali was in command of Mahalchori defence. He came to know about the advance of Pakistan Army towards Mahalchori. In the early hours of 27 April, he sent Havildar Abu Taher with a reconnaissance patrol to verify the position and direction of advance of Pakistan Army. After conducting reconnaissance, Havildar Abu Taher informed Major Shawkat that detachments of 3rd Commando Battalion of Pakistan Army along with thousands of Mizo soldiers were rapidly advancing towards Mahalchori. He also informed that the commandos were arriving via helicopter. Captain Khalequzzaman, Captain Aftab Qader and Lieutenant Mahfuz were alerted in their positions in the high grounds ahead of Mahalchori Bazar.

The defence was comprised of two companies under the command of Captain Khalequzzaman and Captain Aftab and the company under Lieutenant Mahfuz was positioned in the depth. Major Shawkat took position near Mahalchori dak-bungalow. At around 10 am, one company of Pakistan Army's 3rd Commando Battalion along with 1,500 Mizo soldiers made contact with Captain Khalequzzaman's company. A fierce firefight broke out between the two forces. It is worthwhile to mention that for years Pakistan Army were training the Indian

Mizo rebels, providing them with arms, ammunition and logistics and inducting them into India to fight against Indian security forces and the army. Mizo leader Laldenga proclaimed himself as the commander of Mizo army and was also the self-proclaimed president of Mizoland. 3rd Commando Battalion was in charge of training the Mizos in the deep forests of Chittagong Hill Tracts. As such, the Mizo soldiers were attached with 3rd Commando Battalion for the operation in Mahalchori. The Mizo leadership had put in all their resources and manpower at the disposal of Pakistan Army to fight against the Mukti Bahini. The best fighting unit of Mizos was named 'Lion Brigade' which consisted of 1,500 Mizos who were armed with the same weapons as an infantry unit of Pakistan Army. The Mizos also had a number of female soldiers in their brigade.

The joint forces of Lion Brigade and a company of 3rd Commando Battalion of Pakistan Army attacked the position of Captain Khalequzzaman with full fury using all their weapons. After some time, Captain Khalequzzaman's company, under fire, readjusted its position on the other side of Chengi canal braving through the mortar and machine gun fire. In the meantime, the Mizos also attacked Captain Aftab Qader's company position which was now the forward company. This company fought hard from higher ground

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and caused sizeable casualties to the Mizo soldiers. Three hours of battle almost came to a standstill as Pakistani soldiers and Mizos could not make any headway. Under cover of mortar fire, company commander of 3rd Commando Battalion ordered the Mizos to launch frontal attacks against Mukti Bahini positions in higher ground which again failed. As the intensity of battle increased, another



company of 3rd Commando Battalion was seen being heli-dropped behind the advancing Lion Brigade. Violating rules of tactics, Mizos were being ordered by the company commander of 3rd Commando Battalion to go forward in waves and attack Mukti Bahini positions repeatedly in broad daylight. Over megaphone, Pakistan Army officers were heard shouting to the Mizos that if any of them withdrew, they would be killed by the commandos who were positioned at the back. Mukti Bahini was holding onto the ground repulsing every attack and causing heavy casualties on the Mizos. By noon, as no progress was made by the Mizos, 3rd Commando Battalion forward company commander ordered the evacuation of the Mizo dead bodies lying in the open and later ordered the Mizos to continue the assault. With no other alternative, the Mizo soldiers renewed their attack although their morale was largely shattered. They were able to advance and took position on some high grounds from where they had a better view of Mukti Bahini positions. With prolonged firefight the ammunition supply of the Mukti Bahini was running out.

Captain Aftab's company being the forward most company had to take maximum responsibility of holding onto the defence and repulsing the repeated attacks. He was in the forward trench on the right side of the company position on a higher ground. The air-cooled Vickers medium machine gun on his left brought by the EPR soldiers was causing heavy casualties on the enemy. Suddenly the machine gun stopped firing due to a mechanical problem. Taking advantage of this situation, the Mizos followed by the commandos, reached nearly 300 metres of Mukti Bahini position. Major Shawkat watched the distressful situation from his position near the dak-bungalow and shouted to Aftab: "The machine gun is not firing. Tell your light machine gunner to keep firing rapidly or we are all finished today."

The situation was further aggravated as the mortar fire from the enemy intensified. A number of mortar shells fell near the position of the light machine gun and the gunner lost his nerves to continue firing as he appeared to be in temporary shell-shock.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 1