

Operation Kalachara Tea Garden

LIEUTENANT GENERAL M HARUN-RASHID, BP (RETD.)

After a series of delaying battles at Ujanishar, Akhaura, Kharampur, Rajapur in April, 1971, my forces i.e. D Company, 4E, Bengal and two assorted platoons consisting of EPR, Mujahid and volunteers were forced out of Bangladesh. We crossed the border at Narsingarh opposite Singerbil of Bangladesh in the first week of May, 1971. For obvious reasons we were battle-fatigued and exhausted. On crossing over to India, my first priority was to consolidate my troops and take stock of all available arms and ammunition, and at the same time establish a camp where all troops could be accommodated. During this time there was very little space available in the area as the border area was already populated with Bengali refugees who had built scanty shelters for themselves all along the border. On the other side, the Indian BSF was not sure how to deal with armed refugees like us. To start with, they wanted us to deposit our arms in their armoury, which we refused. However in a few days' time, with the help of the battalion headquarter and the newly established Government of Bangladesh we could start managing our affairs. We also started receiving some support, from some relief organisation in the form of polythene sheets and bamboo, to establish our camp. The main uncertainty was food, as no one was sure where the next meal would come from.

However, within a few days of establishing the camp, we started our operational activities by sending out fighting and harassing patrols, setting up small ambushes, etc. During this time, a large number of Bengali youths were crossing over to India and all of them wanted to join the *Mukti Bahini*. Due to acute shortage of accommodation, food and weapons, it was not possible to accommodate them in our camp, although we did accommodate a few local volunteers.

By end of June '71, the enemy had established permanent defensive positions at Akhaura, Kharampur, Rajapur, Singerbil and Kalachara Tea Estates. The gaps between the defensive locations were dominated by foot/rail patrols. Our forces had to infiltrate between their positions to go inside and carry out minor operations. A good number of *Gono Bahini* fighters from Sectors 2 and 3 used to enter Bangladesh through my area.

There was also another development on the Indian side. About 2 km east of our location in Narsingarh, one Indian infantry battalion (10 Bihar) established its camp. In the beginning of July, I received a number of visitors from that unit. On one occasion the commanding officer also came up to see us and rapport with them was quickly established. However the commanding officer reminded me a number of times that we should not undertake any operation from within Indian territory. Moreover, I was also asked to keep them informed of our operations before execu-

tion. They were very apprehensive of Pakistani retaliation on the Agartala air field as well as the Agartala township.

By this time, the strength of my company had risen to about four hundred men. Though the number of freedom fighters increased manifold, we were seriously short of weapons and equipment. We were also faced with a serious shortage of ammunition as we were using Chinese weapons and the Indian Army did not have any Chinese ammunition. Due to these limitations and because of the onset of monsoon, the situation was not at all conducive for launching operations deep inside Bangladesh. Our main occupation was to train freedom fighters and send

about a thousand yards of land, the great Kalia Bill, east of the Akhaura-Brahmanbaria rail line over which Pakistani forces had no control, provided great flexibility for the Freedom Fighters. In fact by June, Narsingarh corridor became a very safe and popular crossing point for *Gono Bahini* members of Sector 2 and Sector 3. Since a large number of *Mukti Bahini* members were infiltrating through Narsingarh corridor and carrying out successful operations in the Dhaka-Comilla-Brahmanbaria area, Pakistani authorities started taking actions to close the gap. By the beginning of July a Pakistani battalion (31 Baluch) was deployed in the area and they deployed two companies with the

and freedom fighters started deserting the camp. Only the training activity at the camps could not keep the fighters happy. As such, I felt the urgent need of undertaking some operation to raise the morale of my own troops as well as shatter the confidence of occupation forces located in the area. After some deliberation, I decided to attack the Kalachara Tea Garden area as it was isolated from the rest of the enemy positions. The tea garden is located about 12 km north of Akhaura Railway Station and to the East of the Akhaura-Sylhet railway line, within the area protruding inside India. The border, to the South and East of the tea garden, was thickly vegetated with three to four feet



Procession urging women to take up arms, Dhaka.

PHOTO: JALALUDDIN HAIDER

them to Bangladesh for minor operations. However, regular forces also carried out limited operations like fighting/domination patrols, raids and ambushes in the border areas.

During this period our operations more or less remained limited to hit-and-run actions against the enemy's fixed defences and other locations of the occupation forces. Through extensive patrolling, we regained some control over the area. The enemy restricted themselves to daytime movement only. From Narsingarh camp it was easy for *Gono Bahini* members to infiltrate inside Bangladesh as the bordering area was thickly vegetated and sparsely populated. Additionally, after crossing

battalion headquarter at Akhaura, one company at Rajapur-Singerbil-Merashani area and another company-plus at Kalachara Tea garden area. The whole deployment was supported by a battery of artillery based at Kodda area, west of Akhaura. Through these deployments and domination patrols, they effectively controlled the area, the *Mukti Bahini* infiltrations virtually came to a standstill. On the other side, Indian authorities also imposed strict restrictions on any operations from Indian territory.

By this time, due to serious shortage of logistic support such as accommodation, ration, ammunition etc., the morale of the *Mukti Bahini* was sagging. A few soldiers

high tea plants and other trees. The area was undulated with heights varying between 15 and 20 feet. The capture of the area would open up the previous route of infiltration for Freedom Fighters. After extensive patrolling and thorough reconnaissance, we established that a full company of the Pakistan Army with an additional platoon of EPCAP was located in the area. The location was logistically supplied from Akhaura and also supported by the Artillery Battery located at Kodda, west of Akhaura.

As per military norms, more than a battalion strength was required to attack a

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