

The end of the Liberation War '71: Road to Dhaka

MA HASAN

THE misty days of winter 1971 were full of surprises and excitement for me. I was a young lieutenant in the Bangladesh Army, and was asked to work as adjutant of the 2nd East Bengal Regiment which I rejected, saying, "I have left the medical profession to fight and drive out the invaders; sitting behind a table is not the job I want."

I was then posted as company officer of the regiment, and to my surprise, was selected to receive the operation order for my brigade from the Eastern Command Headquarters at Agartala.

I received the order on November 27 from representatives of the Indian GOC (General Officer Commanding) at their headquarters in Agartala. Around 8 pm that night, officers were sitting around a big dinner table. They had just finished their dinner, and were welcoming me with great enthusiasm. They said, "Young man, you are the lucky chap who will receive something valuable from us. Have dinner, we have just finished."

I was offered chapatis and dal with ghee. I felt overwhelmed to have received such warm welcome from the topmost officers of the Indian Headquarters. The attentiveness and enthusiasm of Brigadier Mishra was extraordinary. The words that were spoken there decided my future.

Me and my company were selected to enter Bangladesh first, on the night of November 29. But as there were severe casualties—deaths and injuries of a number of soldiers—before we launched the attack, we had to abandon the original plan.

I was thrown into a ditch by an airburst shell along with branches of a mango tree. Luckily, I was not killed nor injured. We had to postpone the plan for several hours to muster our courage and organise the shattered company.

I assumed the full responsibility of leading the Vanguard Company across a six-mile minefield. The final attack took place on the night of November 30. It was a foggy night. Dense mist was clinging to the ground, parts of the sky and the full moon. We started creeping forward through paddy fields using metal items to search, detect and deactivate any mines. It was a real test of our nerves. I had to replace soldiers who showed any sign of weakness or shakiness with those who were bold and full of raw courage. Subedar Sultan of Bashkhali was helping me.

It was my CO (Commanding Officer) who trusted me to take command and carry out the Operation "Nuri Crack" (General Moinul Hossain Chowdhury, Ek General Er Nirob Smriti Kahi). It was a unique opportunity for me to prove my courage and authority. I was supposed to get to Azimpur Railway Station and dig fox holes to ensure frontline position and order artillery attack by giving the code "Dhamaka".

Once I assured my flank position, including the deployment of fellow companies and enemy position, I was ready to attack. The "H" hour was at 01:00 hr. Once preparations were complete, I ordered my boys and gunners, as well as the artillery unit of the 57 Mountain Division and our Mujib Battery, to shell all fortified bunkers and tank positions of the Pakistani



Army. As soon as I uttered "Dhamaka", the artillery barrage of 80-pound shells started.

The shelling was supposed to continue for an hour, but sensing hard resistance and the towering defence of the enemy army, I ordered it to continue for hours.

When I was sure it was a success, I again uttered "Dhamaka" at 4 am, signalling our forces to stop the barrage and allow us to advance and charge the enemy in their bunkers.

We did intensify our attack at 5 am when darkness faded away. Unfortunately, some concrete bunkers at remote corners which we had missed and our reconnaissance team hadn't noticed were becoming a threat—the enemy was trying to target us with heavy machine guns and rocket launchers.

We were failing to quell and silence them as our approach to the road were heavily mined. Meanwhile, a few of our brave soldiers led by Subedar Sultan started to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat in their crushed bunkers.

The intense battle in built-up areas reminded me of the fierce assault on French soil recapitulated by Van Romel in his famous book, *The Attack*.

It lasted for nearly two hours. We had to withdraw from the frontline bunkers as the mist grew denser, worsening visibility.

I was adamant to continue the assault, ignoring my loyal subedar's advice to stop.

At last, an airburst shell which missed my head by a few inches stopped me from firing. By then, some of my soldiers and the flank led by Captain Matiur Rahman had retreated to safer locations. But that did not deter me, neither was I daunted.

But when my Subedar warned me saying, "our first line led by company commander Lieutenant Ibrahim has withdrawn", I was at a

loss. We had to withdraw a bit and wait for the sun to clear away the mist.

We intensified our attack near Azimpur with the help of the Indian Army and also secured our back with support from Captain Matin leading the Mujahid.

Meanwhile, the PAF sabor started strapping and bombing the Pakistani tanks that were moving towards our front—but a counter-attack by the Indian Air Force and RR shots halted their advance for good.

The air attack of the enemy forces continued till December 4 when Lieutenant Badi commanding "B" company was martyred in his bunker. He, and a few of his soldiers, including one Subedar (Sub. Ashraf 32) lost their facial bones and parts of their chests.

That did not stop our attack and waves of offences. Lieutenant Selim, my brother, took over Badi's position. He played a vital role in our attack leading to our victory. He kept the blood-soaked watch of Badi near his heart and vowed to take revenge for his death.

On the evening of December 5, a temporary "lull" set in the Eastern Front, especially when Brigadier Sadullah—the leader of the opposition—retreated to Brahmanbaria.

On the 6th, it was all quiet on the Eastern Front—we could hear the voice of migrant eagles piercing the blue sky.

That morning, we packed up and ran fast to reach Brahmanbaria and Ashuganj. On our way back to Dhaka, Brigadier Shafiullah (later General), CO of the 11th Bengal, came under attack by the retreating Baluch and FF forces from Sylhet.

We had some exchange of fire with them before we reached Ashuganj. We carefully bypassed the Pakistani deployment at Ashuganj near the end of Bhairab Bridge which was being guarded by

the 10th Bihar of the Indian Army.

At the end, we (2nd E. Bengal) reached Demra on December 13. Again it was my luck that I was allowed by my CO to lead an attack on Gulshan via Badda. One person called Anis and two other workers of Kowloon restaurant residing in Badda helped me as guides to cross the unknown wet land. One hour after midnight on the 14th, I reached Gulshan firing mortars and machineguns. I had to withdraw as Brigadier Mishra asked my CO to call me back. My adamant CO again sent me to quell the enemy on the night of the 15th and to make for us an alternative pathway via Gulshan.

When we reached Dhaka crossing Demra, Pagla and Shanir Akhra, it was almost evening—darkness crept into the grasses and ceramic gardens. The sky was illuminated with tracers and Berry lights.

Some untoward incidents happened because of the trigger happiness of some fighters—including the death of an eleven-year-old boy called Iqbal in an officer's quarter in Eskaton.

Our soldiers took refuge in Dhaka stadium that night. Some of our boys slept in the alleys of the stadium market and I had my position at the first floor of the tailor's shop "The Rajak". Me and my CO Captain Matiur Rahman slept on the floor having put down

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some dark coloured suit pieces.

Next morning, we woke up hearing volleys of fire from a few Pakistani soldiers taking position at the top of the gallery. My brave brother Shaheed Lieutenant Selim silenced them with admirable marksmanship.

My mother was longing to see us—so my brother tried to locate my wandering family haunted by threats of the Pakistan Army.

But I did not have that chance as the heavy responsibility of looking after my soldiers circumvented my emotional drive. We moved to Gymkhana club at Racecourse to mark it as the first Rendezvous of 2nd Bengal in a free land.

We were welcomed by the waving green-and-red flag of a newly independent country, along with the chilling breeze of mid-December.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Whole bunch
- 5 Short hairdos
- 9 Bars on cars
- 11 Start of some poem titles
- 13 Safari sight
- 14 Away from the office
- 15 Bat wood
- 16 Mean
- 18 Like many passports
- 20 Outback runner
- 21 Troop member
- 22 Small fastener
- 23 Sixth sense
- 24 Failure
- 25 Diatribe
- 27 Director Forman
- 29 Be decisive
- 30 Fastens down
- 32 Having a range of colors
- 34 Favoring
- 35 Liquid
- 36 Father of King Arthur
- 38 Act the waiter
- 39 Computer command
- 40 Draws
- 41 Supermodel Sastre
- 42 Joke responses
- 43 Is real
- 45 Third-brightest star
- 46 Energy
- 47 Director Forman
- 48 Freshener target
- 49 Pituitary hormone
- 50 Mark of disgrace
- 51 Get in a lather
- 52 Having the advantage
- 53 Dog doc
- 54 The lion's share
- 55 Act enterprise
- 56 Computer command
- 57 Chop into cubes
- 58 Thatcher creations
- 59 Online program
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