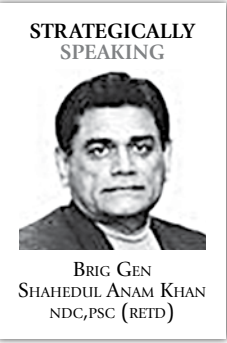


# The “Living Eagle” who beat the heavy odds!



HE departed rather unsung, his glorious past recalled in this country by only a few of his friends and admirers, limited to Facebook posts mainly. The BAF burial ceremony was a very fitting farewell, by his brothers-in-arms who don the sky blue, to an ace pilot to whom so much will be owed by so many peoples and so many countries for a long time. None though, perhaps, who had shared the sky with him could be present. There are possibly only a very few amongst us living who had the good fortune to share the company of this very unassuming personality, when he was in harness. Behind that simple and modest facade hid a personality whose company many kings and coronets, princes and prime ministers, generals and air marshals, had felt proud to have.

Group Captain Saiful Azam lived fully up to his name, which means the Great Sword, both in letter and spirit. Azam demonstrated the mettle in him as a potentially great fighter pilot from the very seminal stages of his career which started with his commission in 1960 in the PAF. He attended the Advanced Fighter Course in the US and earned the most coveted “Top Gun Trophy,” an award earned only by the best among the best of the trainee officers for excellence in flying skills. He is the only pilot to have participated in combat for three different air forces, and the only pilot to have

shot down three Israeli aircraft. When the Arab Israeli war of 1967 broke out, Azam was an advisor to the Royal Jordanian Air Force. And when the Israelis attacked the vital Mafrik airbase in Jordan they were surprised by the lone Hunter fighter opposing them—flown by Azam. In the aerial combat that ensued, he shot down one Mystère and damaged another. He did the same for the Iraqi Air Force taking the toll of two more Israeli aircraft. The only pilot to have earned high gallantry awards from three countries, Azam’s international reputation as a fighter pilot also earned him the unique distinction of being included in the International Hall of Fame by the US Government as a “Living Eagle” in 2001, thereby joining the illustrious company of a handful of legendary pilots.

The dawn and the prime of his life were scripted by Providence. His prime was as if the gods were vying with one another to shower him with approbation and accolades and adorn him with the crown of glory for his successes and triumphs. But it is a feeling of remorse that one is overcome with to think that the departure of a brave heart—of a legend—who has gone finally to meet the Almighty whose nearness he must have felt often up in the vast blue expanse when he was chasing Indian fighters in the 1965 Indo-Pak War or Israeli Mystères in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, has gone almost unnoticed by the media in Bangladesh.

But those who owe a deep debt of gratitude, both at individual and national levels, did not forget Group Captain Saiful Azam on his passing away. And that is not one or two but four different countries. Iraq and Jordan are grateful for his valour in the air which



**Group Captain Saiful Azam (September 11, 1941 - June 14, 2020)**

salvaged a modicum of credibility for those two countries. Palestinians did not forget him either on his passing away; renowned Palestinian journalist Tamer al-Mishal extolled Azam, as “the Eagle of the Air”. In the 1965 Indo-Pak War, his interdictions and ground attack missions, twelve in 10 days, wreaked havoc on the advancing adversary in the Kasur and Sialkot sectors.

Not only his friends but also his foes recalled his heroics. In Israel, Azam is recognised for his bravados, recalled anew when his death was reported prominently in major Israeli newspapers. But in Bangladesh he got mentioned in just a few lines in the inside pages of a few newspapers only.

In the air battles he was like the chivalrous

soldiers of yesteryears. It is said that Saladin in one of his battles against Richard the Lionheart displayed his lion heartedness when, learning that Richard had lost his mount had a fresh one sent to him, because he didn’t want to fight a battle against an army with a disadvantaged commander. So did Azam, in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. On one occasion, in spite of having an Israeli aircraft in his gun sight from the enemy’s rear, he rolled over and approached the enemy from his side, shooting at his tail instead at his fuselage. The Israeli pilot parachuted safely to earth—to recount the incident.

What the Israeli pilot says also is that as he was descending, Azam made a roll and loop and waved at him before pulling away to shoot down another Israeli aircraft. If Azam had wanted, the Israeli would not have been alive to tell the story to his son, who narrated it to a Bangladeshi officer, in the presence of many other officers who happened to be attending a course in Switzerland in 1979 with him. All Azam had to do was to shoot at the fuselage instead of the tail. And that would have been the end of the Israeli. This reveals the chivalrous as well the humane element in the man. War is not about blood and guts only. He destroyed the Israeli Mystère but afforded a second chance at life to the enemy pilot, acknowledged as such later by the pilot himself. Can there be a greater blend of the humane and the chivalrous in a person? That was Saiful Azam the man. He was a brave man as well as a brave soldier, he rejoiced in adversity just as he triumphed in war, fitting perfectly the definition of both a brave man and a brave soldier as characterised by Seneca 2,000 years ago.

In 1971 April, while in Karachi Masroor Airbase, Azam along with a number of Bengali pilots had planned to hijack a PIA Boeing. But that was aborted, betrayed by a fellow Bengali. He was under surveillance of the Pak authorities and grounded along with all the Bengali officers. He was in on Bir Shresto Matiur Rahman’s plan to hijack a PAF trainer, which eventually Matiur did. Azam was arrested, tried and awarded the death penalty which reportedly was commuted at the intervention of the King of Jordan. In Amman a road has been named after him.

Azam’s accomplishments in air battles make one recall the likes of the Prussian Manfred von Richthofen—better known as the “Red Baron” of First World War fame, or of Wing Commander Douglas Bader, the British ace pilot of Second World War. But Richthofen achieved his accomplishments in 750 days; Azam achieved it in less than 16. Richthofen did not live long enough to enjoy his glory. Azam saw the duly deserved accolades being heaped on him long after the air battles had become a glorious part of history. Richthofen died of injuries suffered in combat. Azam eluded all the bullets the enemy could hurl at him.

There is an axiom in the air forces which goes thus: You will meet bold pilots and you will meet old pilots, but you will never meet an old bold pilot. The stakes are very high against the latter. Azam beat the odds. He lived to be 80, passing away on June 14. Group Captain Azam’s name shall forever be etched in history as one of those who conquered the sky.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of *The Daily Star*.

## How to fight a complex, unpredictable virus

**AHMED A AZAD**

BD ANGLADESH had three-months’ notice to prepare for a possible outbreak of Covid-19 but failed to prepare for it. The authorities have tried very hard to convince everyone to use the public health measures that are known to minimise community transmission, but these have not been easy to implement in the densely populated environment of Bangladesh. Lack of coordination, insufficient testing, contradictory and inconsistent directives, and an eagerness to prematurely reopen businesses, have allowed Covid-19 to spread to all corners of the country. Large numbers of healthcare workers, policemen, journalists, transport workers, and other frontline workers, have worked tirelessly and selflessly to help stop the carnage, and in the process far too many of them have paid dearly with their lives.

With rampant infection and death rates increasing every day, and faced with the resulting economic freefall, the government has decided to divide the country into non-contiguous red, yellow and green zones, and impose lockdown in the red zones first. Till now only a very small number of red zones with the highest number of infections have been locked down on an experimental basis. More experiments will waste valuable time and further delay may see more yellow zones turning red, and more green zones turning yellow. An all-out war has to be launched against the virus in all red zones simultaneously through total lockdown (not public holiday!) enforced if required with curfews and troop deployment, together with extensive testing to identify infected individuals and their close contacts, followed up with their isolation and treatment in designated public buildings within the red zones.

The obvious weak links in fighting Covid-19 are low capacity of RT-PCR testing and ineffective contact tracing. For contact tracing, the authorities could invite young people living within a red zone to help in neighbourhood surveillance—a strategy that has worked very well in Vietnam’s fight against Covid-19. The huge numbers of tests needed in each red zone is simply not possible with RT-PCR because of the limited availability of very expensive equipment and

*Attempts to produce effective vaccines against many pathogens has failed even after years of trying, and it would not be wise to put all our eggs in the vaccine basket.*

reagents and shortage of trained personnel. To complement RT-PCR testing, the government should seriously consider the use of alternative tests that are inexpensive, rapid and not dependent on specialist equipment or personnel.

To cope with a second wave of Covid-19 in sizable parts of Melbourne (Australia), besides total lockdown a RT-PCR testing blitz has also been launched in which saliva has been substituted for throat and nose swabs. About two months back Bangladeshi media reported on a rapid antigen detection kit, developed by Gonoshasthya Kendra-RNA Biotech Ltd., that also detects SARS-CoV-2 in saliva samples. While RT-PCR test detects viral RNA, the rapid antigen test detects viral surface proteins. So, both tests should essentially provide the same information about the presence or absence of virus.

However, the locally-produced rapid antigen kit is claimed to provide results within 10 minutes, does not require any equipment or trained manpower, and costs only a fraction of RT-PCR. These claims should be verified independently by using the same saliva sample for both RT-PCR and rapid antigen tests. If validated and approved by DGDA, this inexpensive and simple homegrown kit would be ideal for rapid testing and follow up of a large number of people in the red zones. A rapid antibody detection kit (also developed by GK-RNA Biotech) which has been approved by DGDA for studying antibody response to Covid-19 could nicely complement the rapid antigen kit, as together, they would

identify all infected individuals who have also seroconverted. The rapid antibody kit can also be used as a powerful research tool to ask and answer a number of fundamental questions about the consequences of Covid-19 infection.

Antibody testing of blood from Covid-19 patients has yielded some unexpected results. A recent study showed that 3 percent of RT-PCR positive patients failed to produce antibodies against Covid-19 and 4 percent of patients who were RT-PCR negative were correctly picked up by antibody test (Quan-Xim Long et al, Nature Medicine, April 2020). Another study from John Hopkins University also shows (Annals of Internal Medicine, 2020) that RT-PCR can produce 20 percent

question the prospects of long-term natural or vaccine-induced immunity.

The rapid antibody test could also be useful in selecting suitable plasma donors from among recovered patients. Analyses of 370 plasma samples from Covid-19 recovered patients showed that almost 17 percent had almost no antibody response, and while over 80 percent generated varying levels of antibody, only about 10 percent had high levels of neutralising antibodies able to neutralise a laboratory-safe Covid-19 pseudovirus (New York Blood Centre and Rockefeller University, medRxiv, 2020). The above studies show that plasma from asymptomatic and seronegative recovered patients will be of little utility, and only about

be wise to put all our eggs in the vaccine basket. It is quite possible that deliverance may come not from a preventive vaccine but from drugs as happened with HIV/AIDS. A previous op-ed (Covid-19: Taming the Beast, *The Daily Star*, April 14, 2020) pointed to some therapeutic approaches that Bangladeshi scientists could try using with Bangladesh’s own capabilities and strengths. Bangladeshi scientists have demonstrated that full genome sequencing is well within their capability, but instead of being in a race to be the first or who can sequence the most viral genomes, they could collaborate on trying to understand why different people react differently to Covid-19, why some infected people remain asymptomatic, and why some infected patients never produce antiCovid-19 antibodies.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the very poor state and safety of our health services and hospitals, shortage of trained healthcare workers, and insufficient testing capacity needed to meet the challenge. Covid-19 has also doubled the number of “very poor” to 40 million. An annual budget in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic would have been expected to specifically make special allocations for the health, wellbeing and rehabilitation of the poorest and most vulnerable, for improving hospital treatment and public health, and educating and training of adequate numbers of clinicians and healthcare workers.

Covid-19 is not about to disappear soon, and could come back in future in a more deadly form. Only quality clinical and health sciences research and innovation will provide the technological base for Bangladesh to successfully counter this and future medical emergencies. Unfortunately, the token increase in health and education budgets are not enough to have much impact on bringing about the above changes or building technological capacity for the future. Perhaps Covid-19 will nudge our policymakers to realise that investment in health, education and medical research today will be a lasting investment in a healthy, just and prosperous Bangladesh.

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**Only quality clinical and health sciences research and innovation will provide the technological base for Bangladesh to successfully counter this and future medical emergencies.**

PHOTO: DADO RUVIS/REUTERS

false negatives. This demonstrates the value of using RT-PCR/antigen test and antibody test in parallel. In another study comparing Covid-19 symptomatic and asymptomatic patients, antibody response was found to be much weaker in the asymptomatic group, and within 8 weeks of infection 40 percent of asymptomatic and 13 percent of symptomatic patients showed no antiCovid-19 antibodies in their blood (Quan-Xin Long et al., Nature Medicine, June 2020). This brings into

ON THIS DAY  
IN HISTORY



July 10, 1962  
**TELSTAR 1 LAUNCHED**  
*Telstar 1, the first communications satellite to transmit live television signals and telephone conversations across the Atlantic Ocean, was launched this day in 1962, inaugurating a new age in electronic communications.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 Feel nostalgic for  
5 Reduced amount  
9 Like some toothpaste  
10 Sports setting  
12 Fiery crime  
13 Elementary  
14 Complains  
16 Fitting  
17 Rock growth  
18 London's river  
21 Museum focus  
22 Fancy flapjacks  
23 "Common Sense" writer  
24 Title holders  
26 River blocker  
29 Enjoy a bookstore

30 Sub shop  
31 Equip  
32 Steals  
34 Choose to participate  
37 Plain to see  
38 Paris's river  
39 Talks crazily  
40 Mailed  
41 Ceases

**DOWN**  
1 Vanity feature  
2 Be adamant  
3 Ceases  
4 "Auld Lang—"   
5 Chemist's place  
6 Memorable time  
7 Bagel choice  
8 Westey of


"Blade"  
9 Molten rock  
11 Play parts  
15 Zebra features  
19 Egg layers  
20 Gorilla, for one  
22 Engine parts  
23 Fido's foot  
24 "Jeepers!"  
25 Immobilize  
26 Rely  
27 Tips off  
28 View obscurers  
29 Abbr. in company names  
30 Backless sofa  
33 Dressed in  
35 Travel stop  
36 Badminton need

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS


S	H	U	T		A	D	A	M	S
T	O	N	A	L		C	I	V	I
E	N	S	U	E		I	N	A	N
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	F	I	R	E		W	O	R	K
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O	T	T	E	R		S	E	V	E
S	H	O	T	S		T	O	S	

BETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER




WOULD YOU GO OUT WITH ME, MISS BUXLEY?

THAT'S NICE OF YOU, ZERO BUT I'M SEEING BETLE LATELY



HE CAN COME TOO

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



SHOULDN'T WREN BE IN HER BOOSTER SEAT?

ONLY IF YOU'D LIKE A SIDE OF TANTRUM WITH YOUR MEATLOAF