

SEMINAR REPORT ON
LIBERATION OF BANGLADESH : THE WAR OF 1971
IMPORTANT BATTLES AND GALLANT ACTIONS

15 December 2015



Centre for Land Warfare Studies
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The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with contemporary issues of national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflicts and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

SEMINAR REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a National Seminar titled '*Liberation of Bangladesh: The War of 1971; Important Battles and Gallant Actions*' at Manekshaw Centre, Delhi Cantt on 15 December 2015. Veterans from both India and Bangladesh, who had participated in the war, as well as the members of the strategic community, serving officers from Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, HQ Strategic Forces Command, media, foreign embassies and young school children from schools of NCR gathered to go down memory lane through the events that led to the creation of Bangladesh and India's greatest military victory. The seminar was held as a tribute to the martyrs of India and Bangladesh and was well attended with nostalgia resulting in narration of a number of interesting anecdotes by the veterans. These anecdotes assume greater importance as these come from the stalwarts who were themselves present in the thick of the battles and have not been recorded till date. Another highlight of the seminar was the release of the book titled, 'In Quest of Freedom, The War of 1971' which comprised of the personal accounts of soldiers from India and Bangladesh, who actually took part in this war.

PREVIEW

The seminar was conducted in two sessions as under: -

1. **Inaugural Session.** At the start of the inaugural session, there was a Special Address by H.E Mr Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India. This was followed by an Inaugural Address by Gen NC Vij, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, former COAS and present Director of Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). This was followed by the Book Release function of the Book by CLAWS titled 'In Quest of Freedom : The War of 1971' by Gen NC Vij, Guest of Honour and Special Guest, Gen Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, former COAS and the High Commissioner of Bangladesh.
2. **Special Session.** This session was conducted post tea and was chaired by Gen Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, former COAS. This session was focused at 'Recounting the Action' in which the brave hearts both from India and Bangladesh, who had participated in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, recounted their actual experiences of the war zone.

INAUGURAL SESSION

The Inaugural Session commenced with a welcome address by Director CLAWS.

SPECIAL ADDRESS

**H.E Mr. Syed Muazzem Ali,
High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India**

The High Commissioner gave a diplomat's overview on the events as they unfolded preceding the War of 1971. He took the audience through a journey bringing out the turn of events on the diplomatic front and the world scenario before the commencement of the war. He highlighted as to how it became a state of dilemma for the Pakistan Government when prior to the war, while he was serving in the Pakistani Embassy in Washington DC, he along with 13 other diplomats announced their allegiance to the Bangladesh Government in exile. The High Commissioner brought out that the diplomacy had a major role in shaping the world opinion in favour of the resistance movement in Bangladesh, however there were certain hurdles as they could not put across their view in the United Nations as Bangladesh was not a member of UN at that time.

The High Commissioner further brought about that Pakistani's made a series of mistakes which proved beneficial for the cause of Bangladesh. The first among these was expelling foreign journalists and expatriates from Dhaka in 1971. The expatriates who had witnessed the brutality themselves in Dacca were instrumental in establishing the Bangladesh information centre on their return to US. Pakistan also tried to portray the Liberation War as an East- West Rivalry as well as termed it a secessionist war in order to dissuade any support from the international community. Furthering the Bangladesh cause, the Speaker narrated as to how he convinced the US leadership about it not being a secessionist movement by bringing out that the "Bangladeshi's" were a majority in Pakistan and hence the question of secessionist movement simply did not arise.

He further stated that the whole strategy was to finish the war as quickly as possible, to avoid UN mediation and a ceasefire before the desired end state was reached. The point of worry as per the High Commissioner was

that if the thirty thousand odd Pakistani soldiers defending Dhaka decided to stand their ground, it would be a prolonged battle and thus would have made matters critical on the politico/diplomatic front. Gen Niazi as it was making speeches about the Pakistani army's intent to fight till the last man, which further escalated the criticalities for the diplomats committed to the Bangladesh cause.

To make matters worse, after the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, the two world powers were on a verge of a standoff in the Bay of Bengal as the Soviet and Western forces fielded their nuclear armed naval assets to support the two protagonists. The US asked the Chinese to deploy their forces near the Indian borders to pressurize India, however, fortunately the Chinese decided to stay away from this crisis.

Finally all critical decisions went in India's favor and with the assistance of Indian Defence Forces and the committed struggle by the people of Bangladesh, freedom was attained by Bangladesh. The High Commissioner narrated a number of anecdotes to reinforce his views and finally paid his tributes to the martyrs of the Indian Defence Forces, who laid down their lives for the Liberation of Bangladesh and expressed his gratitude towards Indian Defence Forces and the Indian Government and wished for a long standing relationship of friendship between the two countries.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF GUEST**Gen N C Vij, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM****Former COAS, Director VIF**

Gen N C Vij brought out that the war of 1971 is rightly termed as the most significant geo-political event in our history. The lessons that we learnt are as much relevant today, as they were at the time of war and there cannot be a better way to refresh these lessons than going through the reflections of the veterans who participated in this war and that indeed is the biggest take away of this seminar organized by CLAWS. Gen Vij covered his address in two parts. In the first part he took the audience through the summary of events as they occurred during the war and in part two he touched about those important decisions that turned the course of the war in favour of India. The main points of the Inaugural Address were:-

- (a) The two nation theory, championed by the Muslim League, led to the partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947. But the two wings of Pakistan, separated by 1600 kms of Indian territory, could not live in harmony despite their religious homogeneity. The ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversities could not be abridged by an emotional appeal to religion.
- (b) The events after the general election in Pakistan in 1970 and how the genocide and atrocities inflicted by the Pakistan Army on the Bengali populace with the intention of eliminating their rich cultural legacy, forced the hapless population to seek refuge in the safe borders of India. This posed enormous economic strain on a developing country like India and combined with the affiliations of the much concerned Bengali populace of West Bengal, India decided to help on purely humanitarian grounds.
- (c) The charismatic leadership of Shiekh Mujib-ur-Rehman and the spirited resistance movement by the people of Bangladesh and the committed guerilla campaign by Mukti Bahini. He further stated that the conflict was preceded by months of careful military,

diplomatic and strategic planning and discussions. Resource mobilization and force sustenance were complex issues given the nature of terrain and limited Infrastructure. The campaign brought out the virtues of Joint Planning and Execution and the war remains a shining example of jointmanship and integration. The leadership displayed at all levels was exemplary and the conduct thoroughly professional. Innovative use of scarce resources, including the much spoken air assets and out of box solutions won the day for the Indian Armed Forces in one of the shortest wars that brought about greatest of dividends in modern times.

- (d) This war reflected on the human grit and endurance against heavy odds. While the higher directions of war were being implemented in the form of maneuver battles, it was the indomitable courage of the Indian soldiers, the spirited fight by the Mukti Bahini and above all the overwhelming support of the people of Bangladesh that led to the conclusive defeat of a well entrenched adversary. The spotless record of the Indian Army with no case of Human Rights violation reflects on the military professionalism that separated the victor from the vanquished. Not surprisingly, that even today the people of Bangladesh have fond memories and high regard for the Indian soldiers.
- (e) No description of the 1971 War will be complete without highlighting the outstanding contribution of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force. While the Indian Navy blockade of the Eastern and the Western seafronts and bombardment of the Karachi port resulted in successfully cutting-off any reinforcements; the Indian Air Force effectively dominated the skies. In fact the Indian Air Force wiped out the Pakistan Air Force in the Eastern Sector by the second day of war and was available for close air support operations to the ground forces, flying approximately 500 sorties daily.
- (f) The tactful handling by Indian political leadership of the arm twisting by US, during which US deployed its Pacific Fleet into the Bay of Bengal on night 9/10 Dec 1971.

Concluding his address, he stated that the multidirectional attacks combined with the lightening speed of maneuvers employed by Indian Defence Forces shattered the will of the well entrenched adversary to offer resistance and thus resulted in 96,800 troops surrendering to the Indian Army in just 13 days of war, in a terrain as prevalent in Bangladesh, where they could have resisted for months and months.

The Book Release

The concluding event in the Inaugural session was the book release of the book by CLAWS named ‘ In Quest of Freedom : The War of 1971 ’ edited by Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM. This book comprises of first hand untold accounts from the battle zone by the soldiers of India and Bangladesh, who actually participated in the War of 1971. Before the book release function, the editor, Maj Gen Ian Cardozo introduced the book to the audience.

Explaining the genesis of the idea of writing and compiling these stories, he stated that it was 44 years since the war and the generation of soldiers that participated in this war was slowly fading and hence the need to record their experiences for the present and future generations to learn from their experiences. He also stated that this was a humble beginning, as these were only a handful of the narrations of the great victory that led to the liberation of Bangladesh and there must be numerous more stories that require to be written and be compiled. He thanked each and every author of the 47 stories that formed the part of this book. He informed the gathering that CLAWS will undertake such a project even next year and requested maximum of the 1971 War veterans to contribute their narrations towards the same. After the book release a vote of thanks was proposed by the publisher ‘Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd.’.

SPECIAL SESSION: RECOUNTING THE ACTION

General

This session was chaired by Gen Deepak Kapoor, former COAS. The Chair delved into the macro level issues of the 1971 War on the Eastern Front before inviting the panellists to cover their individual accounts. The session comprised of nine speakers as under:-

1. The overall Indian Army plan at macro level followed by the operations of 4 Corps, bringing about its impact on the early fall of Dacca was covered by Maj Chandrakant Singh, VrC, 4 GUARDS, a war veteran of the 1971 war.
2. Battle of Jessore- Khulna/ 2 Corps Zone by Col Surinder Kapur, MVC, ex CO 1 JAK RIF.
3. Battle of Bogra/ 33 Corps Zone by Lt Gen JBS Yadava, PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM, ex DCOAS.
4. Battle of Sylhet/ 4 Corps Zone by Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM.
5. Airborne Operations at Tangail/ 101 Communication Zone by Col Surjit Singh, VrC, 2 PARA.
6. Armour Operations by Col Ravi Pillai, 63 Cavalry.
7. The operations of Indian Air Force in the Eastern Sector were covered by Air Vice Marshall A K Tiwary, VSM.
8. The operations of Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal were covered by Commodore Ranjit B. Rai.
9. Finally, Lt Col Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinta Padak, Bir Protik, from Bangladesh narrated the Bangladesh perspective of the war.

Remarks by Special Guest, Gen Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Former COAS

The General Officer saw action in the Bangladesh Liberation War while being posted to 23 Mountain Regiment and being attached to HQ 61 Mountain Brigade as a GSO3. In his narration the General Officer stated that he will not touch on the genesis of the war, as the same had already been well covered in the morning session, however one issue needs to be debated, as to what was that one single factor that led to such a convincing victory in such a short span of time, with force levels not tilted ideally in favour of India, with India going in with 7 to 8 Divisions and Pakistan defending with 5 Divisions. He stated that adequate preparation, good planning, sound logistics, high morale, Mukti Bahini, strong political will, all these factors notwithstanding, the single most important factor that brought about this victory was the people of Bangladesh.

The General Officer further reiterated that initially when the election took place on 07 December 1970, in spite of emerging as a single largest party, the Awami League was denied their due and when the common citizens joined the protests against the Yahya regime in not honouring the election results, they were subject to heinous atrocities by the Pakistani Forces. Their support for the Mukti Bahini and anger against the Pakistani forces was clearly witnessed as the war started. This provided a psychological edge to the Indian Forces and Mukti Bahini against the Pakistani Forces. It thus had a crucial impact on the strategy for the conduct of the campaign as well to a significant extent on the final outcome.

The General Officer also narrated an incident of the surrender of the 53rd Infantry Brigade of Pakistan Army under the command of Brig Aslam Khan on 10th December 1971, where a force of approximately seventeen hundred men surrendered to forty odd soldiers of Indian army for the fear of being lynched by Bangladeshi population. This specifically highlighted the effect that the anger of the Bangladeshi's common citizens had on the morale of the Pakistani troops.

Highlights From the Narrations of the Speakers Covering Individual Battles and Air/ Naval Operations

This session comprised of the reflections of the speakers as the events unfolded at their individual levels and was focused at the actions at the levels of units and subunits. At the outset Maj Chandrakant Singh made the audience aware of the overall force application by both the sides during the campaign. He brought out that the initial task given to the formations of the Indian Army was to clear the area up to the river lines. The task was kept limited based on the appreciation that Indian Army did not have the resources to cross the rivers and go beyond as also the time was at premium as the UN and US intervention was expected early to bring in ceasefire. However it was the initiative, will to exploit success, risk taking capability and jointmanship combined that resulted in 4 Corps putting nearly two brigades worth of troops across Meghna river behind the Pakistani defensive positions, which turned the tide of the war in favour of India.

Col Surinder Kapur, ex CO 1 JAK RIF and Lt Gen JBS Yadava, 5/11 GR narrated the intricacies of the infantry operations. The difficulty in operating in the obstacle ridden terrain was highlighted especially when the advance was planned to be led by armour elements. As the objectives were approached, the casualties mounted as the Pakistani forces had their defensive deployment in built up areas. However the staying power of armour when combined with their inherent firepower saved the day when the progress of operations seemed near to impossible. The importance of quick maneuvers to unsettle the enemy in his prepared defences was realized and the tanks were used to ferry the infantry as also the captured Pakistan Army and civil vehicles were used.

Col Ravi Pillai, 63 Cavalry covered the issues relevant to the armour operations. He brought out that contrary to the prevalent belief that the Bangladesh obstacle ridden terrain precluded the employment of armour, when the operations commenced, the Indian Army armour elements proved their effectiveness. The operations in Bangladesh were not battles of regiments, rather in many ways these were battles of half squadrons and troops and hence the importance of junior leadership and crew integration

of very high order was required. He also reiterated that the operations in Bangladesh were predominantly infantry operations. Armour could be employed to lead the advance, establish fire bases, carry the infantry elements but the final assault had to be an infantry operation. He also brought out that the faith in the tanks held with them was reposed as in the initial stages of the war as they realized that the recoilless gun rounds hitting the medium T 55 tanks used to ricochet without being able to penetrate. Hence the feeling of invincibility set in the tank crews and they were able to undertake high risk missions with utmost confidence.

Covering the Battle of Sylhet, Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, spoke about the importance of boldness when combined with psychological operations and the rich dividends that can be reaped from them. He narrated the Battle of Atgramin, which was significant as it is probably the last known Khukri assault in military history, carried out without the support of the artillery or other personal weapons, but just with grenades and Khukris. The Pakistanis suffered many casualties as a result of this fierce and swift assault and had a devastating impact on the Pakistani morale. The success at Atgram made the battalion a celebrity unit of the Indian military. Although the unit which was reduced to half its strength post this operation, it was still tasked to launch a Khukri assault in the Battles of Gazipur and Sylhet, as a psy weapon against Pakistani forces who were giving a pitched battle in these areas and were not relenting. He also narrated that at one instance a wrong report by the BBC greatly worked out in the units favor. The BBC announced that a brigade of Gorkha's had landed in Sylhet, where as it was just half a battalion that had landed. The Indian troops capitalized on this piece of information by extending their flanks at the cost of thinning on ground in order to make the enemy believe that it was a Brigade strength force. The gamble paid off and a force of approximately nine thousand Pakistani soldiers surrendered to just approximately 450 Indian soldiers.

Col Surjit Singh, 2 PARA brought out the intricacies of the Airborne Operation at Tangail. He narrated that the task given to them was to capture the strategic Poongli Bridge and ferries east and west. He brought out the importance of rehearsals for the impending task, correct grouping of all arms. He narrated as to how the objective was captured without firing single bullet

owing to the surprise attained by dropping behind the enemy held positions as also by maintaining radio silence. He also brought out the importance of reorganization after the capture of the objective and the initiative of junior leadership, which finally resulted in near annihilation of a complete brigade of Pakistan Army in an intelligent application of ambush and firepower.

The operations of Indian Air Force in the Eastern Sector were covered by AVM AK Tiwary. He brought out that the orders for the Indian Air Force were clear, which were to achieve total air superiority and then provide close air support to the ground forces. The Indian Air Force enjoyed numerical superiority over its adversary in the Eastern Sector and were able to completely neutralize Pakistan Air Force in the Eastern Sector by the second day of the war. This released the complete effort of the Indian Air Force in support of ground forces, which was approximately 500 sorties every day. He stated that for the success of operations it is imperative that a high degree of coordination and planning be put into effect before commencement of war. Preplanned air support is likely to bring in much higher dividends as compared to immediate air support, which is generally reactive in nature. He also reiterated the importance of psy warfare and narrated the incidence of the air strikes on the Governor's house, which brought about the early surrender by Pakistani Forces in Bangladesh.

Commodore Ranjit B. Rai covered the operations of Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal. He brought out that the Indian Navy divers in 1971 with the help of Mukti Bahini managed to sink more than 200,000 tons of Pakistani naval assets. This gave a great blow to the Pakistani War will to fight on. He further narrated that INS Vikrant was instrumental in attacks in Cox Bazaar, Chittagong, and Khulna. The Navy played a crucial role in blocking and destroying Pakistan's Lines of Communications. On 4th December 1971 the INS Rajput sighted a suspicious disturbance resembling a periscope whilst on patrol off Visakhapatnam coast and launched depth charges on the same. This led to the sinking of the PNS Ghazi. The attack on Karachi and the sinking of the Pakistani Submarine were the greatest blow delivered by the Indian Navy to the Pakistani forces. It attacked and destroyed powerhouse, airfields, and naval installations of the Pakistani forces. The effective naval blockade and the aggressive operational campaign by the Indian Navy

both in the Bay of Bengal and the Western Coast made the Pakistan Navy totally redundant and took away the avenues of reinforcement/ evacuation between the then East Pakistan and West Pakistan, thus demoralizing the forces deployed in Bangladesh and thus hastened the surrender.

Address by Lt Col Sajjad Ali Zahir, Swadhinta Padak, BirProtik

The speaker during his address recalled the atrocities committed by Pakistani forces and the deep impact it left on the psyche of the common people of Bangladesh. The Speaker further stated that it was nothing but a strong resolve of the common people of Bangladesh to seek freedom which forced the Pakistani forces to surrender despite having a sizable force present in Dacca and which made the idea of street to street fight virtually impossible and redundant.

The speaker emphasized the importance of documenting the experiences of the brave soldiers who witnessed the war first hand. The speaker who had contributed 15 stories for the book, '*Liberation of Bangladesh: The War of 1971*' covering the operations of Mukti Bahini, highlighted the significance of such seminal pieces, which according to him are important elements of history.

Conclusion

The seminar brought to fore the bravery, sacrifice and valour of the Indian Armed Forces and the people of Bangladesh during the War of 1971. The strategic foresight and planning by India resulted in a Politico- Diplomatic- Military victory of a great magnitude which changed the course of geopolitical relations in South Asia.

