

# Lance Naik Albert Ekka, PVC

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V GANAPATHY

## Introduction

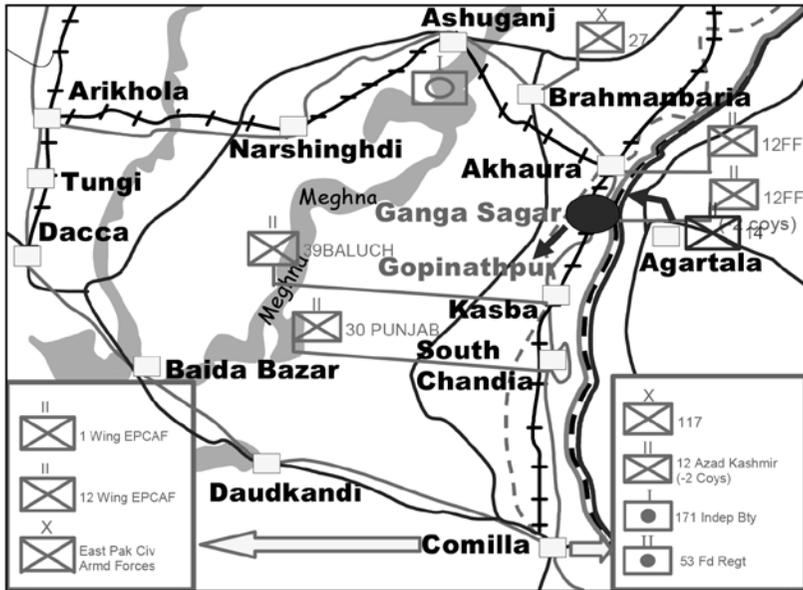
The Indian offensive into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) began after Pakistan launched preemptive strikes on the Indian airfields on December 03, 1971. The Indian offensive progressed along four thrust lines: 33 Corps from the northwest, 2 Corps from the southwest, 4 Corps from the east and 101 Communication Zone from the north. The operation where Lance Naik Albert Ekka would be immortalised was undertaken in the Eastern Sector.

## Operations in the Eastern Sector

The Eastern Sector comprised the area east of the Meghna in the districts of Sylhet, Brahmanbaria, Comilla and Chittagong, and Chittagong Hill Tracts. The approach to Dacca lay across the Meghna, a river of great width ranging from 4,000 to 4,500 yards. It was spanned only at Ashuganj, by a railway bridge about 3,000 ft long. The terrain, except for the hill tracts in the southeast, was low lying and water-logged by paddy fields. Cross-country movement was difficult due to the numerous rivers and drainage channels. A single-metre gauge railway line ran north to south connecting Sylhet to Chittagong, close to the International Boundary (IB) for most of its distance. It was connected to Dacca and Mymensingh, across the Ashuganj railway bridge, and through ferries of Chandpur and Naokhali. Laksham was the hub of road and rail communications to Chittagong, while the Brahmanbaria area was a strategic bottleneck, owing to the Ashuganj bridge.

## 4 Corps Operations

Fig 1



Lt Gen Sagat Singh, GOC 4 Corps with 8, 23 and 57 Mountain Divisions, was responsible for the conduct of operations in this sector. His task was to initially ensure security of rail and road communications in the sector by denying the enemy ingress into the Tripura and Silchar areas. He was simultaneously to launch an offensive to destroy Pakistani forces deployed east of the Meghna and Padma rivers, on the outbreak of hostilities, and capture Comilla in seven days. Depending upon the progress of operations, he would also be required to capture Chandpur, Maulvi Bazaar, Sylhet and Chittagong. Dacca did not feature as a probable objective at this stage. Gen Sagat felt that greater dividends would be obtained if Pakistani forces were unbalanced by a swift and vigorous offensive to secure Chandpur and Daudkhandi, isolating all the troops deployed east of the Meghna and south of Brahmanbaria-Akhaura complex, bypassing the strongly held Comilla - Maynamati fortress, held by 117 Infantry Brigade. While 23 Mountain Division would head for this task, 8 Mountain Division under Maj Gen KV Krishna Rao would head north and 57 Mountain Division under Maj Gen Gonsalves was to capture Akhaura and thereafter build up north of Maynamati, and capture Daudkhandi. Akhaura, occupied by Pakistani 27 Infantry Brigade, was captured on December 05, 1971 by an outmanoeuvring movement carried

out at night, tackling the defences from the rear, while depicting tank noises in the northeast, employing 5-ton trucks, with the silencers removed. Initially, advance along this axis to Dacca was not considered, as it was perceived that the Brahmanbaria bottleneck would be strongly held. Indian intelligence had no knowledge about the road linking Brahmanbaria to Ashuganj; however, sensing an opportunity, Lt Gen Sagat Singh quickly decided to change the thrust line of 57 Division to Brahmanbaria–Ashuganj, instead of going south, which reached Ashuganj on December 09, only to find the rail bridge across the Meghna demolished. By now, all roads to Dacca were open for Gen Sagat Singh, but for the Meghna river.

## **Operation Nutcracker**

Operation Nutcracker was planned to capture Karnel Bazar, Gangasagar and Akhaura. The Pakistani strength in the area was estimated to be the Battalion HQ of 12 Frontier Force (FF) and or 12 Azad Kashmir Battalion with anywhere from two to four companies in defences. Indian 73 and 311 Mountain Brigades, S Force comprising 2 and 11 East Bangladesh Battalions with other attached and supporting elements were tasked for the capture. 73 Mountain Brigade launched the operation on the night of December 01/02. 14 Guards established road blocks south and west of Gangasagar, while 19 Punjab with a troop of tanks captured Karnel Bazar the same night. Thereafter, both battalions contacted the Pakistani forces deployed at Gangasagar and dispensed with them by 1300 hours on December 03. The brigade then exploited towards the main road Brahmanbaria-Comilla. 311 Mountain brigade also launched its operations on the night of December 01/02 with 10 Bihar and 18 Rajput, with the aim of capturing Akhaura. These operations of 73 Mountain Brigade saw Lance Naik Albert Ekka and Maj Ashok Kumar Tara of 14 Guards earn the Param Vir Chakra and Vir Chakra respectively for gallantry displayed in the battle of Gangasagar. Other units too won gallantry awards during this operation, thus, setting the stage for the capture of Akhaura and further advance towards ultimate victory.

This is a narration of the brave action of No 4237746 Lance Naik Albert Ekka of 14 Guards, one of the battalions of 73 Mountain Brigade of 57 Mountain Division of 4 Corps. The task given to 14 Guards was the containment and capture of Gangasagar which was important because it controlled three major axes and its capture, therefore, was essential for furtherance of the operations of 4 Corps.

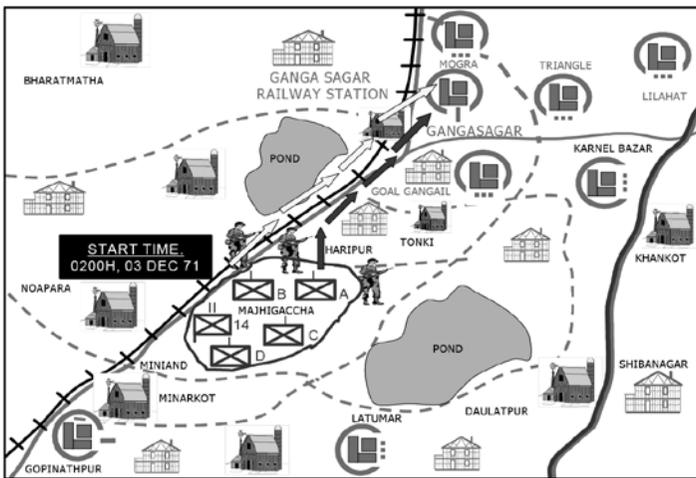
## Albert Ekka and 14 Guards

Albert Ekka was born on December 27, 1942, in Zari village in Chainpur tehsil of Gumla district in present-day Jharkhand to Julius and Mariam Balamdina Ekka, an Oraon Adivasi tribal Christian family. Little would he have known that he was destined for everlasting glory! Right from his early days, he was said to be fond of, and adept at, hunting, tracking and in the use of the bow and arrow. He was also a natural sportsman. This love for adventure, his skills and his sportsmanship would eventually prove valuable in war. At the age of 20, in 1962, Albert Ekka enrolled into the Bihar Regiment, transferring later in 1968 to 14 Guards when it was raised.

14 Guards was raised on January 13, 1968 as 32 Guards (MOD (I)) for counter-insurgency operations in the northeast. In April 1971, the battalion converted to an infantry battalion on Modification 'S' and re-designated 14 Guards in preparation for being launched into operations in East Pakistan. Having trained the Mukti Bahini and been blooded in the 'The Battle of Dhalai', this young battalion was launched into East Pakistan for the capture of Gangasagar in December 1971.

## Battle of Gangasagar

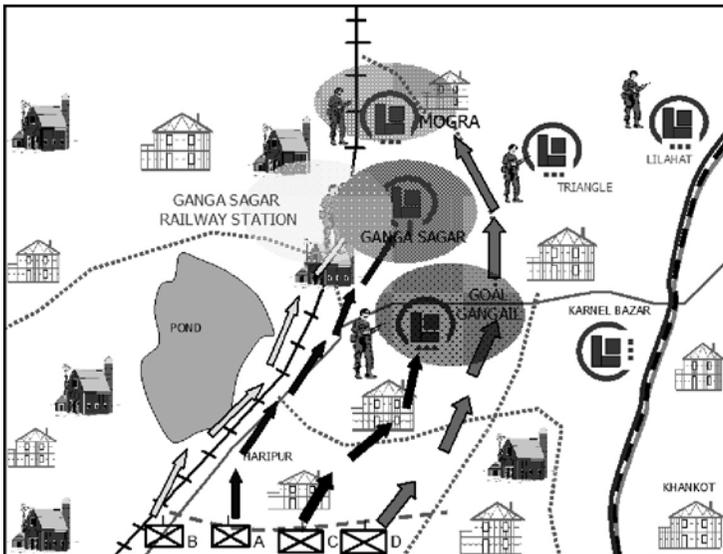
Fig 2



Gangasagar, located approximately four kilometres, south of Akhaura, was a key location providing the link between Kasba and Akhaura and also held the key to capture Akhaura. Capture Gangasagar would also render the

road Brahmanbaria-Comilla under own control and threaten the enemy. The Gangasagar Complex comprised Gangasagar Railway Station, Mogra, Gangasagar, Goal Gangail and Triangle Area. Information about the enemy was scant. According to military intelligence, Gangasagar was said to be held by one company. The Mukti Bahini stated that the position was held by a battalion. It was eventually found to have been held by approximately three companies of 12 Frontier Force and a company of 12 Azad Kashmir and reinforced by a company of Razakars, all in well fortified positions. The main defences were based on the high ground around the railway station and the built-up area. The surrounding marshy area and the few remaining areas were heavily mined with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. The main defences were also extensively wired. The enemy had used their time well and converted the Gangasagar defences into a strong fortress. With the enemy position at Gangasagar Railway Station on a higher ground along the railway line available, as the surrounding areas were marshy and low-lying fields, the GUARDS would have to fight it out.

Fig 3



As per the operational plan, 14 Guards was tasked to capture the Gangasagar Complex on December 03, 1971. 14 Guards moved cross-country and, after five hours of the approach march established itself just south of Gangasagar.

During patrolling, the enemy was noted to be moving freely along the railway track indicating that they were not mined. The Guards launched their attacks at 0400 hours on December 03, 1971, with Alfa and Bravo Companies heading to capture Gangasagar Railway Station and Charlie and Delta Companies taking on Mogra, Gangasagar, Goal Gangail and Triangle. Two companies of the battalion, therefore, attacked the enemy defences along the railway track and were able to reach close to them, but when they were approximately 100 yards away, the enemy opened up with heavy automatic fire. Being restricted to the railway lines, heavy casualties would have resulted if the attack wavered. Fired by their determination to complete their task, the companies rose to the occasion and hurled themselves at the enemy defences. The mines and wire took their toll but the remainders assaulted the position and were soon engaged in hand-to-hand fighting.

### **Albert Ekka's Action**

It was at this stage that Lance Naik Albert Ekka who was with one of the forward companies inscribed his name forever in the annals of the history of his regiment and the nation's Role of Honour. With the enemy entrenched in strong, heavily wired concrete defences the only way to flush them out was by lobbing grenades through the loopholes and finishing them off with the bayonets. One particular light machine-gun (LMG) was holding up the company's progress. Lance Naik Albert Ekka, realising the necessity of eliminating this LMG, charged the bunker and though seriously wounded in the stomach, continued his charge, bayoneted the two enemy soldiers who were operating the LMG and captured the weapon. Refusing to be evacuated, Lance Naik Albert Ekka continued with the assault. Once more, it was held up, this time by a medium machine-gun (MMG) which was bringing down heavy and effective fire on his company from a building and causing heavy casualties. Albert Ekka climbed a side-wall, lobbed a grenade through a loophole and bayoneted the soldier manning the MMG and silenced it, thus, paving the way for his company to capture the objective. In the process, however he suffered grave injuries to which he finally succumbed. Lance Naik Albert Ekka was posthumously awarded the only Param Vir Chakra awarded in operations in the East in the 1971 War for valour and dedication to duty of the highest order.

The attack on Gangasagar Railway Station was unique in the threat and risks it offered as it involved approaching the objective in a single file astride the railway lines. With the enemy well entrenched in concrete bunkers and

determined to defend with all his might, the only way to eliminate resistance was to close in, lob grenades and use the bayonet ruthlessly and effectively. Bitter hand-to-hand fighting ensued. In spite of heavy enemy shelling and air strafing, the enemy was defeated and the Gangasagar Complex captured by 1000 hours on December 03, 1971. As a result of the fall of Gangasagar Complex, the enemy's move on the road Comilla-Brahmanbaria ceased. Ultimately, he was even forced to vacate his strongly fortified position at Ujaisar. Also, with the southern and the southwestern flanks of Akhaura completely exposed and the enemy's rear threatened, he was forced to vacate Akhaura. In this action, 14 Guards lost ten Other Ranks (ORs) and three Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) while 55 ORs were wounded. The enemy left behind 25 dead, six prisoners of war and a huge quantity of arms and ammunition were captured. For this gallant action, the unit won one "PARAM VIR CHAKRA" (Posthumous), one "VIR CHAKRA", four "SENA MEDALS", and one Bar to the "VISHISHT SEVA MEDAL".

### **Citation of Lance Naik Albert Ekka**

The citation of Albert Ekka's action with 14 Guards reads thus:

- *“Number 4239746 Lance Naik Albert Ekka belonged to the left forward company of the battalion which put in an attack on ‘Gangasagar’ at 0415 hours on 03 December 1971, an action which has no parallel in the history of Indian Army as it involved approaching the objective in a single file astride railway lines. With the enemy well entrenched in concrete bunkers and determined to defend it with all their might, the only way to eliminate resistance was to close in and lob a couple of grenades and use the bayonet ruthlessly and effectively. The other rank in the process of charging on to a bunker from which a Light Machine Gun was giving deadly enfilade fire, was seriously injured in the stomach. Nonetheless, Lance Naik Albert Ekka managed to capture the Light Machine Gun and bayoneted two enemy soldiers.*
- *Notwithstanding the injury, the other rank continued to fight on the mile long objective. Towards the Northern end of the objective, one Medium Machine Gun from the second storey of a building held up the advance by effective and accurate fire, inflicting heavy casualties on the company. Lance Naik Albert Ekka crawled upto the building and threw a grenade through a loop hole killing one more enemy and injuring the other. Exhibiting supreme will power and complete disregard to personal safety, the other rank climbed up a side wall, entered the top of the bunker and bayoneted the enemy who was still firing.*

Thus, by silencing the enemy machine gun, the other rank saved the company from further casualties and enabled it to capture the objective. During the process of the last action, Lance Naik Albert Ekka sustained further injuries which subsequently proved fatal. The other rank showed an exemplary act of gallantry and supreme sense of sacrifice and even laid down his life so that company could achieve its aim. For this valiant action and super human act of gallantry, Lance Naik Albert Ekka was strongly recommended for the award of "PARAM VIR CHAKRA" (Posthumous) and was awarded the same on 13 January 1972.

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Col V Ganapathy is former Senior Fellow CLAWS. The views expressed are personal

## **References**

1. Official History of the 1971 War.
2. Battalion Digest an War Dairy of the 14 Guards.
3. Book on PVC awardees by Maj Gen Ian Cardozo (Retd).