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MINISTRY OF
DEFENCE

1971 INDO-PAK WAR: INDIA'S FINEST HOUR & THE CREATION OF BANGLADESH

INTRODUCTION

India gained Independence in 1947, however this resulted in the partition of the country and the creation of Pakistan. The foundation of Pakistan was laid by the Muslim League based on the two-nation theory. The two-nation theory proposed to divide the Independent India on the religious lines. The acceptance of two-nation theory led to the partition of India in August 1947. Initially, Pakistan had two wings; East and West Pakistan which were geographically separated by 1600 kms of Indian territory. The two wings of Pakistan were culturally and linguistically different and the diversities between the two wings could not be bridged by an emotional appeal to religion. Consequently, fissures started erupting in the political body of Pakistan soon after the Independence and with each passing year it widened. The 1965 War also contributed to this growing divide. In the absence of appropriate defence arrangements, the people of East Pakistan felt isolated and abandoned. Finally, the malfeasance of Pakistani leadership during Cyclone Bhola and the overwhelming support for the Awami League in the 1970 elections, proved the proverbial last straw on the camel's back.¹



Pictures of fighters posing on a tank during 1971 Indo-Pak War

(Source: New Indian Express)

¹ The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal.(2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India



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BACKGROUND



Mukti Bahini guerrillas attempt to cross a waterway. Photo: Raghu Rai via Daily Star

(Source: <https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2020/5/2/ecologies-of-emancipation-the-mukti-bahini-rivers-and-the-unravelling-of-pakistan>)

The Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (of East Pakistan) secured an absolute majority in the general elections held in December 1970. This entitled the League to form a Government in Pakistan. The military rulers of Pakistan, however, denied this democratic right to the Awami League in connivance with the PPP led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This arbitrary act of government caused deep resentment among the population of East-Pakistan resulting in widespread protests. When the slide became unmanageable, the Pakistani rulers resorted to a midnight crackdown on 25 March 1971. The Government ordered a military crackdown and repression wherein, the Pakistan army under Lieutenant General Tikka Khan unleashed a reign of terror and massacred thousands of Bengalis in a genocide code named as ‘Operation Searchlight’. The terror-stricken people of East-Pakistan ran for safety to adjoining states of India, viz. West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. The exodus turned into torrents as the months passed. By November 1971, some ten million people of East Pakistan had taken refuge in India. The refugees included many para-military personnel of East Bengal Rifles and East Pakistan Rifles. Once on the Indian soil they organised themselves as fighting units of the



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Mukti Bahini. Many Bengalis serving with the Pakistani Armed Forces, deserted and joined the Mukti Bahini.



Mukti Bahini fighters walking through heavy monsoon floods in 1971. Photo by: Londoni.co

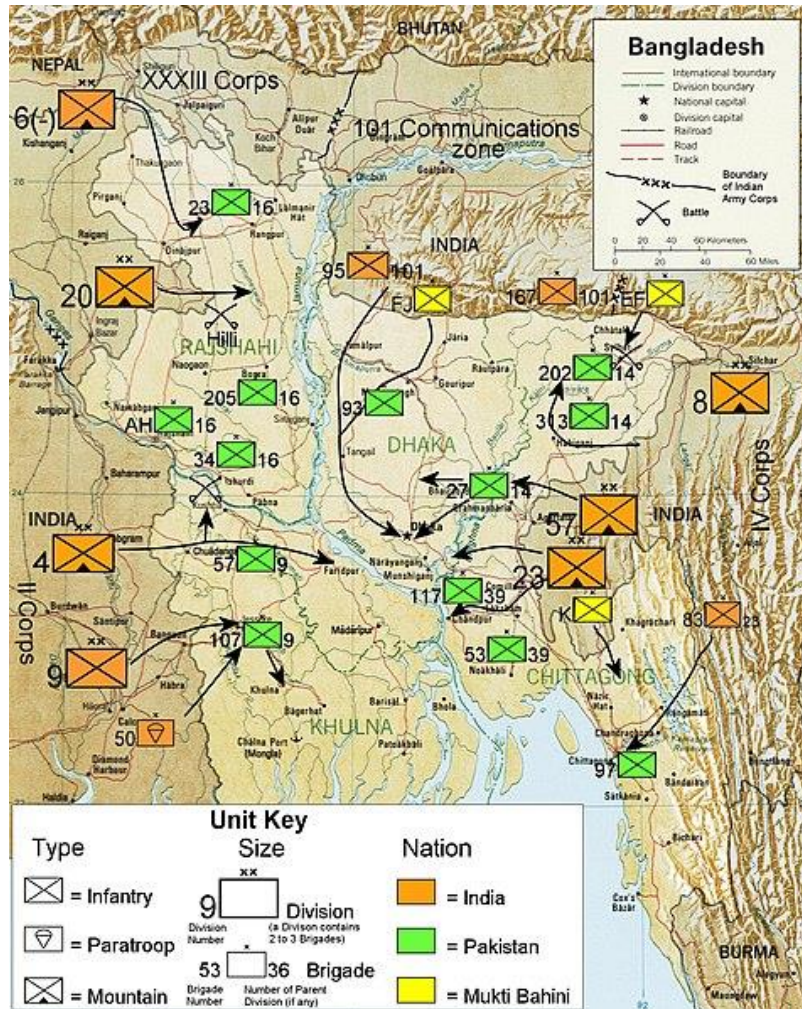
(Source: <https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2020/5/2/ecologies-of-emancipation-the-mukti-bahini-rivers-and-the-unravelling-of-pakistan>)

Due to the clashes between Mukti Bahini and Pakistani Army the atrocities increased drastically and the Indian borders were often transgressed by the Pakistani troops. Hard-pressed by the burden of refugees, India asked Pakistan to create conditions for their safe return. At the same time the US in an act of moral blindness supported Pakistan as both President Nixon and the NSA Henry Kissinger were keen on using the offices of General Yahya Khan to reach out to Chairman Mao of China for rapprochement after decades of hostility. Infact, while on a visit to Islamabad, in July 1971, Kissinger was flown secretly to Beijing to meet with the Chinese Premier Chou-en-Lai. Pakistan sought to internationalize the issue by attacking India on 03 December 1971. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three Services on a large scale. The war was fought on two fronts, the Eastern and the Western. On the Eastern side, Pakistan adopted the defensive strategy to delay the ingress of Indian troops, while on the Western side, it adopted the aggressive policy to occupy some Indian territory so as to force the Indians to give up gains in



East Pakistan and divert troops to the Western front. In contrast, India adopted a defensive strategy on the Western front and an offensive strategy on the Eastern front.²

EASTERN FRONT



An illustration showing military units and troop movements during operations in the Eastern sector of the war.

(Source: Wikipedia)

On the Eastern front the Indian Army defeated four divisions and 30,000 para-military forces of the Pakistan Army in the thirteen days' war. Three Corps and 101 Communication Zone Area of the Indian Army participated in this war.

² Stories of Heroism (PVC & MVC Winner). Dr. BC Chakravorty (1995). Allied Publishers Limited and Ministry of Defence, Government of India



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Indian XXXIII Corps (20 Mountain Division and 71 Mountain Brigade) commanded by Lieutenant General ML Thapan conducted operations between the Jamuna and Padma rivers in the North-Western sector of East Pakistan. While its other Divisions 17 and 27 Mountain Division were focused on the Northern borders, and 6 Mountain Division less 9 Mountain Brigade was kept as a reserve. The sector was defended by 16 Pakistan division and 3000 paramilitary forces. While 71 Mountain Brigade advanced on Pachagarh-Thakurgaon axis, the division attacked the waist line of the sector i.e., Hillii area. It was finally reduced on 11 December 1971. The corps also captured enemy strongholds of Phulbari, Charkhai, Pirganj, Badhuria, Hilli, Rangpur and Bogra on 16 December 1971. During the war it inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and captured some seventeen thousand of its troops. It suffered 471 killed and 1450 wounded in the war.

The II Corps (9 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division) commanded by Lieutenant General TN Raina carried out operations in the South-Western sector of East- Pakistan. The sector was bounded by Padma River in the North, Jamuna rivers in the East and the Bay of Bengal in the South. One Pakistani infantry division with eight battalions was defending this sector.

The 4 Mountain Division carried out operations in the Northern part of this sector. It fought its way through Jibannagar, Katochandpur, Darsana, Suadih, Kaliganj, Jhenida and Magura. It also overcame tough enemy resistance at Kushtia. The division fought a crucial battle on 15 December on the Western banks of the Madhumati.

9 Infantry Division carried out operations in the Southern part of the Corps sector on Garibpur-Jessore-Khulna axis. It captured Burinda and Jessore and then moved on to Khulna. The Pakistan brigade commander surrendered here on the 17 December 1971 with 3700 troops.

An important thrust into East Pakistan was made by 101 Communication Zone Area (95 Mountain Brigade and FJ Sector with one battalion) from the North. It covered the area bounded by the Meghna in the East, Jamuna in the West and Padma in the South-West. The Zone launched its attack on two axes. 95 Mountain Brigade advanced on Kamalpur-Jamalpur-Madhupur axis. The brigade encountered tough opposition at Kamalpur and Jamalpur. Heavy use of air and artillery power finally broke the enemy resistance at these strongholds. The enemy broke out from Jamalpur on the night of 10 December and suffered heavy casualties during the retreat.

Meanwhile, FJ Force made rapid progress on Haluaghat-Mymensingh axes. The Pakistani position at Haluaghat was outflanked and the defending battalion totally destroyed. The Force captured Mymensingh and Madhupur on 11 and 12 December respectively. This was the time when Indian IV Corps was knocking at the Eastern gate of Dacca. The Pakistani Commander

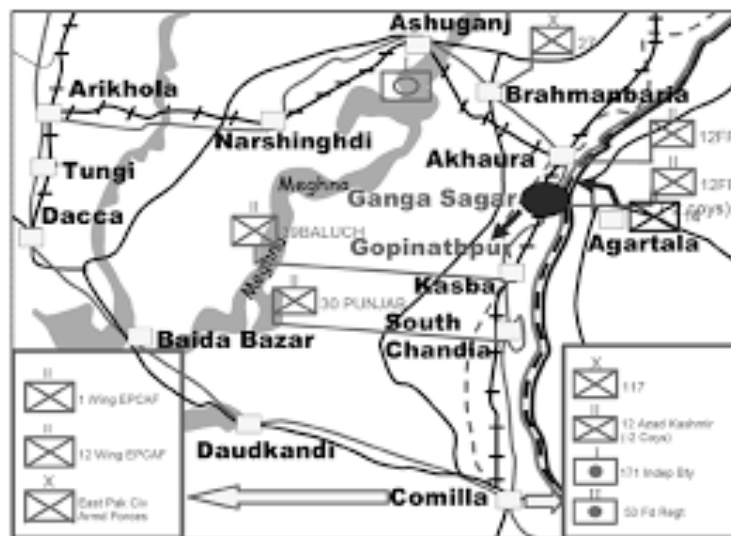


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panicked and withdrew the small force, which was defending this sector, to meet the threat from the East. This enabled the 101 Communication Zone Area to advance unchallenged. It was FJ Sector (strengthened by two battalions) which finally made it to Dacca on the 16 December.

But the most important thrust into East Pakistan was carried by IV Corps (8 Mountain Division, 57 Mountain Division, 23 Mountain Division, Kilo Force, East Bengal Battalion) commanded by Lt Gen Sagat Singh. It covered the area stretching from Sylhet in the North to Chittagong in the South. The sector was defended by two Pakistani divisions.

The 8 Mountain Division operated in Sylhet area. It encountered the major part of the Pakistan 14 Division in this sector. Its 81 Mountain Brigade advanced on Kalaura-Sylhet axis and 59 Mountain Brigade on Kalaura-Frenchganj-Sylhet axes. It fought its way to Sylhet capturing Maulvi Bazaar and all opposition enroute. On 07 December 4/5 GR was heli-lifted to Sylhet to unnerve the enemy and break his will to fight. The division captured Sylhet on 14 December 1971. On 17 December, 107 officers and 6500 soldiers of the Pak army surrendered to 8 Division.



Operation of IV Corps

(Source: CLAWS Archives Lance Naik Albert Ekka, PVC by V Ganaptahy)

57 Mountain Division (73, 311 Mountain Brigade) operated on Agartala-Akhaura-Ashuganj-Dacca axis. In one of the initial attacks on Gangasagar near Akhaura on 03 December, Lance Naik Albert Ekka of 14 GUARDS displayed extraordinary gallantry and was awarded the Param Vir Chakra. On 05 December, the division attacked Akhaura with two brigades and inflicted a crushing defeat on the defending 27 Pakistan Brigade. Indian Army and Indian Air Force launched a combined operation codenamed as Operation Cactus Lilly. It was an aerial operation launched on the Meghna Heli Bridge. It took place on 09 December 1971, when the Indian Air Force (IAF) airlifted 4 GAURDS of 311 Mountain Brigade to Raipura initially followed by other units of IV Corps. The Indian Army and Mukti Bahini fighters from



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Brahmanbaria to Raipura in Narsingdi over the River Meghna, bypassing the destroyed Meghna Bridge and Pakistani defences in Ashuganj. Meanwhile, 61 Mountain Brigade of the division advancing on Commilla-Mynamati-Daudkandi axis in a wide outflanking move captured Daudkandi on 10 December 1971. This move by 61 Mountain Brigade forced the 117 Pakistani Brigade to vacate well prepared defences at Lalmai and Comilla and fall back on Mynamati. This in turn facilitated the advance of Indian 23 Division.

On 11 December 1971, 2 PARA launched an airborne operation to capture Poongli Bridge on the Jamuna River which would cut off the Pakistani 93 Brigade which was retreating from the North to defend Dhaka and its approaches. The unit was also tasked to link up with the advancing MARATHA LIGHT INFANTRY on the ground to advance towards the East Pakistani capital. An approximate of 700 paratroopers led by Lt Col Kulwant Singh Pannu, touched ground at 1630 Hours. The unit drop was dispersed over a wide area, but the Paras regrouped quickly and commenced their attack. By 1900 Hours they had captured their main objective, cutting off the Pakistani 93 Brigade retreating from the North. Link-up with 1 MARATHA LI was established after the Marathas broke through at Tangail Road and reached the bridgehead that very evening. The Pakistanis, attempting to retake the bridge rushed the Indian positions that evening, however, were repulsed. The Tangail Airdrop and the subsequent capture of the Poongli bridge gave the advancing Indian Army the maneuverability to side-step the strongly held Tongi-Dacca Road to take the undefended Manikganj-Dacca Road right up to Mirpur Bridge at the gates of Dacca. Lt Col Kulwant Singh was awarded the MVC for his leadership in battle. For this and their role in capture of the strategic bridge, 2 PARA received battle honour for Poongli Bridge and theatre honours for Dacca.³

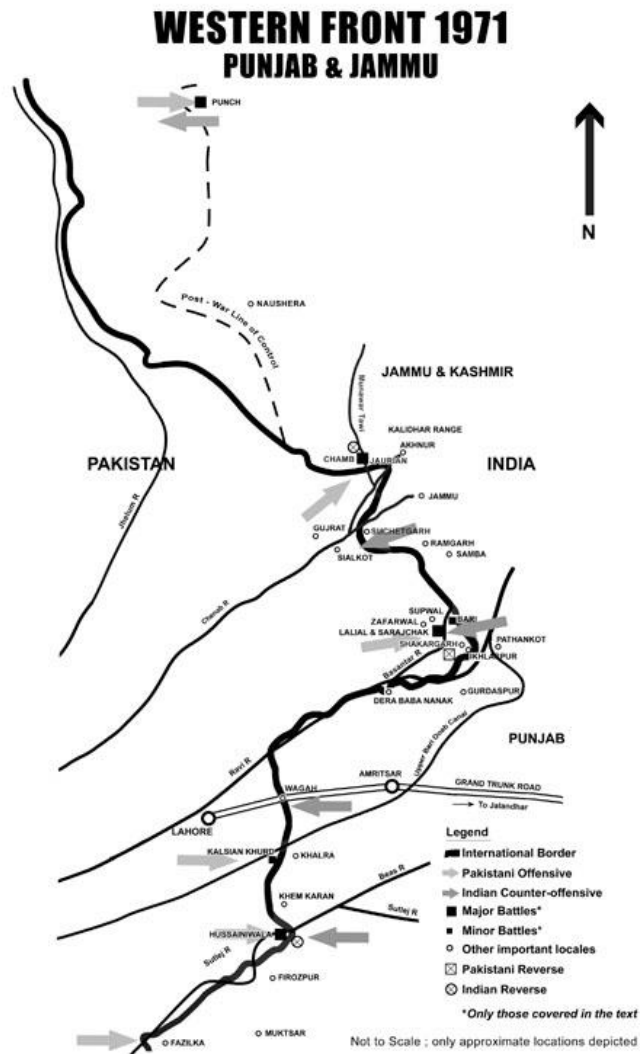
The Southern thrust in the IV Corps sector was carried by 23 Infantry Division (83 Infantry Brigade, 181 Infantry Brigade and 301 Infantry Brigade) on Himatnagar-Laksham-Chandpur axis. It completely encircled and emasculated 53 Pakistan Brigade at Laksham. By 09 December the division had captured Chandpur. It crossed the Meghna on 14 December and then pressed on to Dacca, where it reached on the 16 December 1971, just after the 301 Communication Zone Area. Further South a two-pronged attack was made on Chittagong. The Northern hook was led by 83 Infantry Brigade and the Southern hook by the Kilo Force. The enemy surrendered on the 16 December 1971 after feeble resistance. It is said that precision rocket attack by IAF fighters on the Governor's Secretariat in Dacca hastened the Pak decision to surrender.

On 16 December, at 1630 Hours Lt Gen Niazi surrendered to Lt Gen Aurora with 93,000 regular and para-military men. War on the Eastern front ended in a complete victory for India.

³ The Tangail Airdrop: A landmark operation in 1971 Indo-Pak war (Accessed on 16 November 2022)
<https://www.aviation-defence-universe.com/tangail-airdrop-landmark-operation-1971-indo-pak-war/>



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War in the Western Front

(Source: Indian Defence Review)

WESTERN FRONT

On the Western front, India maintained a defensive posture to start with. The main battles were fought in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Rajasthan. In Jammu and Kashmir 15 Corps Zone was commanded by Lieutenant General Sartaj Singh. Here Pakistan launched a fierce attack in Chhamb Sector on 03 December. Indian troops repulsed the Pakistani attack. Subsequently, during the battle of Munnawar Tawi, 191 Indian Brigade deployed in the area was pushed back.



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Pakistan 111 Infantry Brigade, well supported by tanks, advanced over the Indian position of Darh and Raipur crossing. But this adventure proved costly and they had to pull back after suffering heavy losses. The 10 Indian Division regained the lost positions, and it was the end of the Pakistani misadventure in the Chhamb Sector. Pakistani aggression in the Punch sector also proved unsuccessful. After the initial loss of some areas, the Indian 93 Infantry Brigade repulsed the Pakistani attack and recaptured the lost positions. In the Kargil sector, the Indian 121 (Independent) Infantry Brigade captured some important outposts after fierce fighting at extremely high-altitude areas in adverse weather conditions.

PUNJAB SECTOR

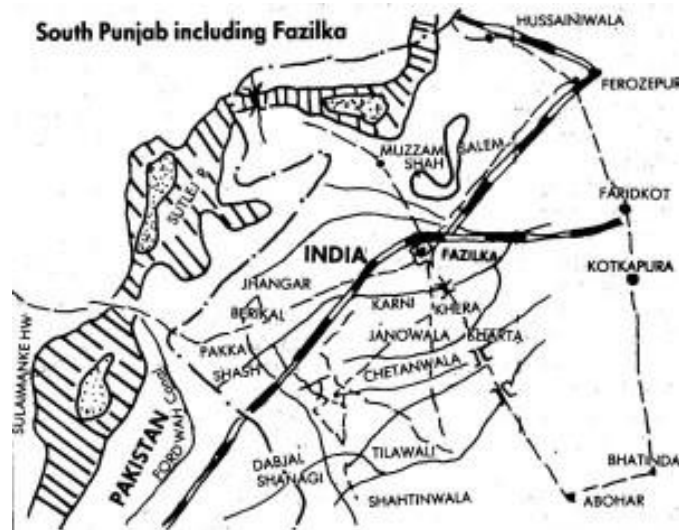
In Shakargarh Sector, I Indian Corps commanded by Lieutenant General KK Singh launched an offensive between Basantar and Ravi rivers to break enemy concentration in the area. The Corps made a double thrust into the Shakargarh bulge, one from the North and other from the East on 05 December. The Northern thrust between Basantar and Bein rivers was carried by 54 Infantry Division, 39 Mountain Division and 16 (Independent) Armoured Brigade which included both Poona Horse and Hodsons Horse. Indian troops penetrated well inside the Pakistani territory encountering heavy minefields and stiff enemy resistance. Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of Poona Horse distinguished himself in a fierce tank battle here and was decorated with the Param Vir Chakra. In Shakargarh Sector, another feat of conspicuous courage and leadership was displayed by Major Hoshiar Singh of 3 GRENADIERS, and he was also decorated with the Param Vir Chakra. Further, 36 Infantry Division captured Nainakot and Narkot on the Gurdaspur axis. XI Corps commanded by Lieutenant general NC Rawley , operating between Dera Baba Nanak and Ganga Nagar, also made some substantial gains. The capture of Dera Baba Nanak by 86 Infantry Brigade of 15 Division was indeed a notable achievement. The Corps made significant territorial gains.

The notable battles in the Western sector took place in the a Hussainiwala and Fazilka in Punjab Sector where Pakistan made initial gains. 35 Infantry Brigade placed under the operational command of 7 Infantry Division was deployed for the defence of the Ferozpur Sub-sector with 25 BSF battalion. The Hussainiwala enclave comprising about 47 sq km area was vital for India, as it encompassed the Hussainiwala canal, headwork of river Satluj and roads and rail bridge. On evening of 03 December 1971, in a surprise attack, the Pakistani 106 Infantry Brigade bought down heavy artillery fire over the area, simultaneously attacking 15 Punjab. These initial attacks indicated that Pakistan Army planned to capture the Hussainiwala bridge intact and then get its armour across in order to capture Ferozepur. By the morning of 04 December 1971, the Pakistani Army had established a foothold in the area. Preparation was on for the launch of another attack during the day. Timely air-strikes kept them at a bay for a while, but the enemy reached the Indian positions. On 03 December the bridge was demolished to save Ferozepur from the enemy assault. On evening of 04 December, the commander of 35



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Infantry brigade pulled back his troops from the bridgehead. The withdrawal of south bank was completed by the end of the day.⁴



An illustration of Battles fought in south Punjab.

(Source: Indian Defence Review)

During the Battle of Fazilka, on 03 December 1971 in a surprise attack the Beriwalla bridge on Sabana distributary held by 3 ASSAM was captured by the Pakistani Troops of 6 FF under Major Shabir Sharif, the elder brother of Genral Raheel Sharif. Taking advantage of which Pakistani troops crossed the Beriwal bridge and established a strong foothold. Thereafter a series of unsuccessful counter attacks were launched by 67 Infantry Brigade mainly by 4 JAT, supported by a squadron of 18 CAVALRY. However, while they were unable to evict the lodgement, they were successful in preventing any expansion of the bridge head and were able to contain the ingress.⁵

RAJASTHAN SECTOR

In Rajasthan Sector, 11 Infantry Division and 12 Infantry Division were deployed to carry a double thrust on the Barmer-Naya Chor axis and Longewala-Rahim Yar Khan axis, respectively. On 03 December, the Pakistani attack on Longewala was blunted with tactical air support, which cost them 24 tanks and 150 vehicles. 11 Infantry Division overran Pakistani border posts on the 04 December and advanced 45 km into Pakistan territory by 11 December. The audacious move by 10 PARA Commando under Lieutenant Colonel MK Bhawani Singh has gone down in the annals of military history and he was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. Its attack on Naya Chor could not materialise because of the ceasefire. Further, in the South, Kutch

⁴ The 1971 War : An Illustrated History.Dk India.(2022).

⁵ Preventing a Breakout at Beriwalla. Major General Jagatbir Singh. Journal of the United Service Institution of India,Vol. CLI, No.626, October-December 2021.



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Sector, Indian paramilitary forces made some significant thrusts and captured Vingoora and Chhad Bet Complex.

INDIAN NAVY

The Indian Navy performed exceptionally well in both the theatres. The Indian Naval offensive started on 04 December, when INS Vikrant based aircraft and ships of the Eastern Fleet struck military targets in East Pakistan. Round the clock attack by the naval aircrafts caused extensive damage to Pak military installations and harbours. Cox's Bazar airfield was damaged, and fourteen Pakistani ships/coasters and six gunboats were destroyed. The Pak submarine Ghazi was sunk off the coast of Vishakhapatnam. On the Western side, daring attack by the Indian Naval Task Group on the night of 04 and 08 December on Karachi caused much consternation to the enemy and colossal damage to the Karachi harbor. Indian Navy lost anti-submarine frigate Khukri during the naval operations in the Arabian Sea. The captain of the ship, Captain MN Mulla in the highest traditions of the navy refused to be evacuated and went down with the ship. Indian Navy indeed achieved its primary objective by establishing effective supremacy over the Arabian Sea. Pakistan Navy remained bottled up in the sanctuary of Karachi harbor for the entire duration of war. Besides securing the safety of Indian merchant ships, the Indian Navy also enforced Contraband Control over the merchant ships approaching Pakistani harbours.

INDIAN AIR FORCE

Indian Air Force also gave a good account of itself. In a major aerial battle on 22 November, Indian Gnats shot down three of the four Pakistani Sabres, which were on their offensive missions over Boyra on Eastern front. In total, IAF deployed twenty-eight fighter/bomber squadrons on the Western front and ten squadrons on the Eastern front during the War. Since Pakistani pre-emptive strikes on Indian airbases on 3 December, both India and Pakistani air forces conducted several attacks and counterattacks on the adversary to gain air superiority. IAF in all carried some 4300 offensive missions, counter-air and interdiction operations, close air support missions, and reces. Besides containing the Pak Air Force offensive, the primary objective of the IAF was to destroy and disrupt their communication systems, destruct fuel dumps, and ammunition reserves, and contain her ground forces. IAF well achieved these objectives. Its performance, particularly on the Eastern front, was decisive as it achieved total air superiority over the enemy. The IAF supported the army resolutely in the crucial battles of Chhamb and Longewala. Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon distinguished himself in an air battle against Pakistani Sabres at Srinagar on 14 December 1971. He was decorated with the Param Vir Chakra.



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CONCLUSION



Lt Gen Niazi signing the Instrument of Surrender under the gaze of Lt Gen Aurora.

(Source: Wikipedia)

The war lasted for fourteen days. Pakistani forces in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were convincingly defeated and about 93,000 of them were made prisoners. In the West, a large area of Pakistani territory was occupied by Indian troops. About 600 officers and men of the Indian Army were decorated with gallantry awards. Of these four earned Param Vir Chakra, 76 Maha Vir Chakra and 513 Vir Chakra. In this war India suffered more than 12,000 casualties. Of these 2,908 laid down their lives for the country. The war on the Eastern front ended with unconditional surrender of Pakistani forces at 1631 hrs on 16 December 1971. Thereafter, the Indian Prime Minister announced a unilateral ceasefire effective from 2000 hrs on 17 December 1971. The Simla Agreement signed by the Prime Minister of India and the President of Pakistan at midnight of 02 July 1972. The peace treaty "put an end to the conflict and confrontation that have hitherto marred their relations" and to conceive the steps to be taken



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for further normalization of relations while also laying down the principles that should govern future interactions.

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