

THE INDIAN NAVY IN THE BAY OF BENGALTHE THEATREOverall Concept of the Operations

Prior to the eruption of the crisis in East Pakistan, India's naval strategy vis-a-vis Pakistan saw the Arabian Sea as the main theatre of operations. However, the momentous events of spring and summer of 1971 decisively shifted the geopolitical focus to the east. The consequent build-up and sustenance of the Pak Army in East Pakistan, the cutting edge and chief instrument of policy, had to a large extent, been carried out by sea. Hence the sea lanes between the two wings of the country constituted its jugular, both for the provision of logistic support and for the evacuation of troops in the event of defeat. Severing the jugular, i.e., the destruction of the Pak maritime forces deployed in East Bengal and prevention of sustenance from reaching the enemy by sea, was thus of utmost importance in case war broke out between Pakistan and India. Hence the need arose for India to exercise absolute control over the Bay of Bengal.

The Eastern Naval Command had an operational responsibility of a sea area of over 2.5 million sq.miles. The 3000-km length of India's eastern seaboard and the coastline of the then East Pakistan included the major Indian ports of Calcutta, Haldia, Paradip, Vishakhapatnam, Madras and Tuticorin and the focal point of Pak maritime activities in the east, Chittagong. The Andamans and Nicobars, comprising 219 islands, stretched over a distance of 440 nautical miles, running from north to south, and dominated a large part of the Bay(1).

Strategically it was important, but the impracticability of keeping such a vast area under constant watch was realised. Hence, in keeping with its offensive spirit, the Indian Navy decided to keep the 'neck' of the adversary under active surveillance. In carrying out this task involving a sea area of 18,225 sq. miles, every merchant ship encountered at sea would have to be challenged, identified and boarded, a large number of gunboats and other craft that were being used by the Pak authorities for inland and coastal troop transportation and logistic support would have to be destroyed, Chittagong would have to be isolated from the rest of the world, the entire area of responsibility would have to be 'sanitised' by eliminating the submarine threat, and relentless offensive action mounted against enemy ships and shore

targets. If a war had to be fought, the winter months were considered the most suitable as the rivers and 'khals' (canals) were easier to negotiate during this season. But the possibility of a Pak pre-emptive attack any time between summer and winter could not be ruled out and in case such an attack was launched, it would be required to be neutralised and the initiative retrieved from the attacker by reacting as quickly as possible and launching a bold offensive which, while achieving the naval objectives, would be complementary to the plans of the Indian Army and Air Force(2).

### Threat Perceptions and Plans

At the planning stage, the need for wresting the initiative by resorting to offensive operations was at once the moving force and the informing spirit. The main vehicle for such operations, INS Vikrant was, however, sick with boiler trouble which would severely limit her operational capability. It would also increase her vulnerability to an attack by the Pak submarines and if the submarines did succeed in sinking the Vikrant, it would not only be a major blow to the nation's morale but would also present the enemy with a needless triumph. The Arabian Sea was obviously more accessible to Pak submarines, chariots and aircraft. Considering all the factors, it was decided to use the carrier in an offensive role in the Bay of Bengal and commit her entire striking power to the destruction of enemy ships, airfields, ports and harbour installations.

With this momentous decision was born what was christened later as the Eastern Fleet to which, besides the ships and submarines already under the operational control of the Eastern Naval Command, two gunships of the Western Fleet, INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas, were attached for the duration of the operations. The 'teeth' of the Eastern Fleet thus comprised the carrier, the two gunships, two Petya class anti-submarine vessels, INS Kamorta and INS Kavaratti, and the submarine, INS Khanderi.

The main bulk of Pakistan's naval fleet in the east consisted of gunboats with limited seagoing capabilities. The primary threat to Indian ships, ports and harbours in the east was posed by the four Pak submarines. Out of these, PNS Ghazi with an endurance of 14,000 nautical miles, was capable of sustained operations in the Bay of Bengal against the ships of the Eastern Fleet, especially the Vikrant, and the major ports such as Vishakhapatnam and Madras(3). The eastern waters were outside the operational range of the three Daphne class submarines which had an endurance of only 6,000 nautical miles,

but even these could be deployed in the Bay by fuelling en route either from Pak or neutral ships off the coast of Sri Lanka or from a Sri Lankan port. "The weather was suitable and there were no factors to inhibit this"(4). Another threat was the transport, in a similar manner, of midget submarines and the launching of 'chariots' against surface forces in the Indian ports and harbours in the Bay of Bengal. It was, however, appreciated that the Daphne class submarines would be needed in the Arabian Sea for operations against India's Western Fleet, and only the Ghazi would be committed to the east.

It was vital for the Pak forces in East Bengal to keep their life lines open by safeguarding the traffic into and out of its three main ports, Chittagong, Chalna and Khulna. The security measures to be adopted for the purpose, it was appreciated, would include shore defences augmented by ships' guns, mining, aerial strikes and patrolling by smaller craft, while the offensive measures would be the destruction of Indian surface units at sea and damage to Indian ports and harbours by using the submarine and the chariots.

Any war following a pre-emptive Pak attack was likely to be brief, and hence all Indian operations would be required to be quick and sharp(5). The Indian Navy's plans would be required to have built-in "flexibility and the ingredients wherein several options can be individually or collectively implemented in the achievement of the aim. This would also ensure that no opportunity for offensive action is lost and this should be the essence and keynote of our multi-purpose plan. We decided on an omnibus plan to cover the several contingencies likely"(6).

The omnibus plan, while providing strict security measures against sabotage and suitable disposition of ships and secrecy of their movements, included destruction of enemy forces and merchant shipping, strikes of enemy ports and bases, air support to ground forces and preventing ingress into and egress from East Pakistan ports of all Pak and neutral ships by resorting to contraband control, blockade and, if necessary, minelaying by carrier-borne aircraft. Translated into mission-oriented tasks, these involved attacks by ships and aircraft on Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, Chalna, Khulna and Mongla, destruction of enemy shipping and submarines at the ports and at sea, providing close air support to the Army, carrying out amphibious landing of troops whenever called for, exercising strict contraband control and security of Indian ports on the Bay of Bengal(7).

# THE RIVAL FLEETS IN THE EAST

## The Indian Fleet

The Eastern Fleet, which was commanded by Rear Admiral S.H. Sarma and operated under the overall command of Vice Admiral N. Krishnan, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, came into being in October 1971. Besides the aircraft carrier, it consisted of two gunships, two anti-submarines vessels, one submarine, one destroyer, three landing ships, one tanker, one seaward defence boat and three patrol craft(8).

INS Vikrant (Captain Swaraj Parkash) which became the flagship of the Eastern Fleet, had a displacement of 19,500 tons, a length of about 210 metres and carried a complement of 25 aircraft - eighteen Seahawk fighter-bombers, five Alize anti-submarine aircraft and two Chetak (Alouette) helicopters. She was fitted with fifteen 40-mm anti-aircraft Bofor guns and had a maximum speed of 24.5 knots. With 182 officers and 1663 sailors on board(10) the carrier was, of course, the biggest ship of the Indian Navy and constituted a miniature India with personnel from different cultural, ethnic, educational, religious and socio-economic backgrounds living together and working for a common cause.

The two frigates in the Eastern Fleet were INS Brahmaputra (Captain J.C. Puri) and INS Beas (Commander L. Ramdas), the former being the senior ship of the squadron. These ships had a displacement of 2,515 tons each and were armed with four 4.5-inch AA/SU guns, four 40-mm AA guns and one Squid triple-barrel depth charge mortar and had a maximum speed of 25 knots.

The two antisubmarine vessels were INS Kamorta (Captain M.P. Awati) and INS Kavaratti (Commander S. Paul), Kamorta being the senior ship of the squadron. Each of these ships had a displacement of 1,200 tons and was armed with four 3-inch AA/SU guns and five 21-inch torpedo tubes.

The submarine INS Khanderi (Commander R.J. Millan) which had a displacement of 2,000 tons (surfaced) and 2,300 tons (submerged), had been assigned to the Eastern Fleet. She was armed with eight 21-inch torpedo tubes.

Desh Deep was a tanker attached to the Eastern Fleet for the duration of the operations.

INS Magar (Commander T.S. Singhal) was a landing ship (tank) of World War II vintage and had a displacement of 4,980 tons. She was armed with two 40-mm AA guns and six 20-mm AA guns. The two landing craft (tanks) were INS Gharial (Lieutenant Commander A.K. Sharma) and INS Guldar (Lieutenant Commander U. Dabir) armed with rocket projectiles. The landing ships and craft meant for amphibious operations were used for landing personnel, tanks, vehicles, weapons, stores, etc.

INS Rajput (Lieutenant Commander Inder Singh), the "greyhound of the Bay of Bengal", was a destroyer equipped with four 4.7-inch AA/SU guns, four 4-inch AA guns, four depth charge throwers and eight 21-inch torpedo tubes. This ship was also of World War II vintage.

INS Akshay (Lieutenant S.D. More) was a seaward defence boat and was equipped with one 40-mm AA gun.

INS Pulicat (Lieutenant S. Krishna), INS Panvel (Lieutenant Commander J.P.A. Noronha) and INS Panaji (Lieutenant R. Chopra) were small patrol craft used for patrolling harbours, ports, bases, etc.

The air element comprised, besides the 25 aircraft on board the Vikrant, some shore based IAF aircraft which were to be used for maritime reconnaissance. There were two HS-748 aircraft at Charbatia and one at Port Blair. For coastal surveillance, one Dakota was positioned at Vishakhapatnam and one at Madras(11).

The IAF was also to provide anti-shipping strikes, fighter cover and photo reconnaissance and meet transport requirements on request.

### Pak Naval Forces

PNS Badr, a destroyer of World War II vintage, was the only major warship in East Pakistan before the war. But in August 1971 she was transferred back to West Pakistan for repairs and nearly came to grief during her passage at a position about 800 nautical miles off Goa due to a cyclone.

The major Pak naval units in the east were, therefore, the four Town class patrol craft, PNS Comilla, Jessore, Rajshahi and Sylhet. Besides these, there were 2 landing craft, 2 seaward defence motor launches, 12 Shanghai class gunboats reported to have been received from China and 35 mechanised craft fitted with guns. Each one of the patrol boats was armed with two 40-mm AA Bofor guns. In addition, a large number of AA batteries and guns had been

positioned at strategic points for the defence of important shore installations(12).

The air element, comprising the PAF aircraft in East Pakistan, was formidable. But it was assessed that these aircraft would mainly be deployed in providing air support to the Pak land forces and would not be available to provide adequate support to the Pak Navy.

The only Pak submarine in the eastern waters, immediately before and during the operations, was the Ghazi, a Tench class submarine built at the Portsmouth Naval Dockyard, USA as USS Diablo (the devil) and later transferred to the Pakistan Navy free of cost. It displaced 2,410 tons, had a surface speed of 20 knots and a submerged speed of 10 knots, carried mines and was equipped with ten 21-inch torpedo tubes. She had an operational range of 14,000 nautical miles at 10 knots and a complement of 89 officers and sailors.

Strengths of the rival fleets in the eastern waters at the commencement of hostilities thus were:

<u>Ship</u>	<u>Indian Navy</u>	<u>Pakistan Navy</u>
Submarines	1	1
Aircraft carriers	1	-
Destroyers/frigates	5	-
Landing ships/craft	3	2
Tankers	1	-
Smaller vessels	4	53

While the Indian Navy had deployed such ships in the Bay of Bengal as would constitute a blue water force, the Pak fleet in the east comprised ships that would mainly operate in the harbours and inland waterways of East Pakistan. This was because the tasks of India's Eastern Fleet mainly related to operations on the high seas(13). But in Pak Fleet, only the submarine was to be used in an offensive role for seeking and destroying Indian ships at sea and sabotaging Indian ports and harbours. All surface units, some of which had limited seagoing capability, were to be deployed in a defensive role for the security of East Pakistan's ports, harbours, their approaches and the contiguous sea areas(14).

### THE SINKING OF PAK SUBMARINE GHAZI

#### Elimination of the Sub-Surface Threat

The dawn of 3 December 1971 broke on Vishakhapatnam's shores like any other dawn but the

night of 3/4 December witnessed an exciting event which significantly affected the war(15).

PNS Ghazi, the only Pak submarine operating in the Bay of Bengal, with the mission of sinking INS Vikrant and mining the approaches of Indian ports on the eastern seaboard, was sent to her doom during the early hours of 4 December thus virtually eliminating the underwater threat and 'sanitising' the entire Bay of Bengal.

It has been confirmed from a chart recovered from the wreck of the Ghazi that she had sailed from Karachi on 14 November 1971, was 400 nautical miles off Bombay on 16 November, and reached the Bay of Bengal on 20 November. She was off Madras on 23 November and reached Vishakhapatnam soon after and lay in wait for the Vikrant and other ships to come out of the harbour, not knowing that Vikrant was hundreds of miles away and she had been duped into believing that the carrier was in Vishakhapatnam. This was done by other ships masquerading as the carrier and making signals to various authorities, and by the Eastern Naval Command Headquarters requisitioning berths for the carrier and indenting stores and other supplies at Madras and Vishakhapatnam(16).

In retrospect it is clear that this contrived spurt in requisitioning, particularly for meat and fresh vegetables, must have been picked up by Pak spies. This is further evidenced by the signal, received by the Ghazi from the Commodore in Charge of Pak submarines in Karachi on 25 November, quoted later in this chapter, stating that Vikrant was in Vishakhapatnam(17).

### The Denouement

After the feeble attempt at a pre-emptive attack on Indian airfields by the PAF aircraft on the evening of 3 December, it was appreciated by the naval authorities that a pre-emptive underwater attack against the Naval Base at Vishakhapatnam might be imminent. All local naval defences were immediately alerted and precautions were taken within the harbour against possible sabotage. All ships were made to sail out of harbour before midnight(18)

Lt Cdr Inder Singh, Commanding Officer of INS Rajput, took his ship out of the harbour around midnight on 3/4 December. Great care in navigation was necessary as all navigational aids had been completely switched off. He had been briefed by the Eastern Naval Command authorities on the possible presence of a submarine outside Vishakhapatnam harbour

which might try to sink a merchant ship leaving harbour mistaking it for the carrier or to lay a minefield in order to prevent the carrier and other ships from leaving harbour(19).

On sighting a sea disturbance caused by a possible submerging periscope, INS Rajput decided to go into action. She carried out an immediate attack directly over the sea disturbance with depth charges, and then proceeded on her urgent mission.

A few moments before the Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation shortly after midnight, a very loud explosion was heard from the sea which was of such great intensity that it sent shock waves through the buildings on the sea front. The explosion was heard, among others, by the Coast Battery which immediately made a report to the Maritime Operations Room of the Eastern Naval Command Headquarters.

It was initially assumed that the explosion was the result of the attack carried out by INS Rajput. Searches were commenced and co-operation of local fishermen, who had earlier been briefed on possible developments of this kind, was sought.

The next morning (4 Dec), some fishermen reported large oil patches and picked up some debris off the harbour entrance. INS Akshay was immediately ordered to proceed to the area and after a day-long search, she confirmed that there was a large submerged object about three miles off the harbour entrance in about 17 fathoms (30 metres) of water(20).

The next day, i.e., on 5 December, INS Akshay succeeded in identifying the submerged object as a bottomed submarine. She anchored close to the object and sent divers below. At 0914 hrs she made a signal to the Eastern Naval Command Headquarters, confirming that the submerged object was indeed the wreck of the Ghazi, the 'Defender of Faith' lying defenceless on the seabed. She was found in position 17° 40.8' North, 83° 21' East with her head pointing towards the harbour entrance. The length of her hull from the conning tower to the stern was about 61 metres (200 feet) and the forward part had been completely blown off. The stern was intact, there was no sign of life or engine noise, a long slick of diesel oil was still being made, air bubbles were noticed coming out and all hatches (openings) were tightly screwed down. Among the large amount of debris collected was one damaged escape set.

Naval Headquarters was immediately informed. But it was decided that no announcement would be made till the identity of the kill had been established



beyond all doubts. An aircraft was positioned at Vishakhapatnam on 6 December to fly evidence of the submarine's identity to New Delhi.

By now divers had entered the submarine's fin where there was some loose gear but they could not enter the conning tower and hatch. The first break came at 1155 hrs on 7 December when a diver opened the conning tower lower hatch and a dead body was recovered. The hydrographic correction book of PNS Ghazi, PN 83, and one sheet of paper with the official seal of the Commanding Officer of the submarine were also recovered and three more dead bodies were floated out. The dead bodies recovered from the submarine were accorded burial at sea by the Eastern Naval Command in accordance with naval custom.

All papers recovered were in a soggy state and were cleaned and dried out before being sent to Naval Headquarters as the "Ocular Proof" of the identity of the submarine. The Raksha Mantri made the announcement on the sinking of the Ghazi in Parliament on 9 December.

The Command Diving Team was in charge of the diving operations and soon brought up a large number of items from the submarine after blowing open a hatch. One of the items recovered was a clock which had stopped at 0015 hrs which was the time the explosion had taken place on the night of 3/4 December.

A chart recovered from the Ghazi's hull indicated the movements of the submarine immediately preceding her sinking. From this chart and the following signal and other items recovered from her wreck, it is apparent that the submarine had been assigned the task of sinking the Vikrant and mining the eastern ports of India, especially Vishakhapatnam(21):

FM COMSUBS

IMMEDIATE

TO GHAZI

SECRET

INFO PAK NAVY

OCCUPY ZONE VICTOR WITH IMMEDIATE DESPATCH(.)  
INTELLIGENCE INDICATES CARRIER IN PORT (.)

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An alternative explanation for the sinking of the Ghazi has been provided by some naval experts as quoted by Vice Admiral N. Krishnan, "The Ghazi had

evidently come up to periscope or surface depth to establish her navigational position, an operation which was made extremely difficult by the black-out and the switching off of all navigational lights. At this point of time, she probably saw or heard a destroyer approaching her, almost on a collision course. This is a frightening sight at the best of times and she obviously dived in a tremendous hurry and at the same time put her rudder hard over in order to get away to seaward. It is possible that in her desperate crash dive, her nose must have hit the shallow ground hard when she bottomed. It seems likely that a fire broke out on board for'd (forward) where, in all probability there were mines, in addition to the torpedoes fully armed. Whatever may be the cause of the final explosion, it was quite enough to seal the fate of the Ghazi forever"(22).

Referring to the sinking of the Ghazi, a Pak General claims that having been loaded with mines the submarine met with an accident on her passage and exploded(23). This explanation is clearly misleading, because the fact that the Ghazi was lying in wait for INS Vikrant has been documentarily proved, besides the 'flotsam' from the Ghazi indicating that debris was picked up from the area in which INS Rajput had dropped her depth charges. But whether the explosion was caused by the bows of the submarine hitting the seabed hard during a crash dive or by the implosive damage caused by the Rajput's depth charges is unlikely to be resolved.

## THE BATTLE OF THE BAY

### Preparation

On being attached to the Eastern Naval Command as the flagship of the Eastern Fleet, INS Vikrant arrived off Madras on 31 July 1971 and commenced her work up with the other ships which were to operate with her - the anti-aircraft frigates INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas, the anti-submarine vessels INS Kamorta and INS Kavaratti and the submarine INS Khanderi - in order to give them adequate experience in operating with a carrier. During the period of the work up, which continued till 13 September, emphasis was laid on anti-submarine warfare and air strikes on ships and shore targets. Army co-operation exercises were also held with local units of the Army(24).

This was followed by Fleet exercises held in the North Bay in September which culminated in simulated attacks on Vishakhapatnam, the major naval base in the east and the location of the headquarters of the Eastern Naval Command.

The Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet (FOCEF), Rear Admiral S.H. Sarma, assumed charge at Vishakhapatnam on 14 October. The same day a flash message was received from Naval Headquarters, saying that a pre-emptive attack by Pakistan was possible that very night. At this time, INS Vikrant was at Madras and the four other ships were at Vishakhapatnam. Vikrant was immediately ordered to prepare for sea with utmost despatch. The Fleet Commander embarked on board INS Brahmaputra and sailed from Vishakhapatnam at midnight, with INS Beas in company, to join the carrier at sea and then to steam towards Chittagong so as to be in a more advantageous position to initiate offensive operations. The other two ships, INS Kamorta and INS Kavaratti, were to sail in order to rendezvous with the Fleet in the Bay of Bengal and, in the event of the pre-emptive attack taking place, commence offensive operations forthwith. The pre-emptive attack, however, did not materialise.

The Fleet thereafter continued its work up and carried out tactical exercises including mock attacks on shore targets in Vishakhapatnam on the night of 26/27 October. The Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral S.M. Nanda witnessed Fleet exercises on 16 November and expressed his satisfaction at the Fleet's combat readiness.

It was now considered necessary to "tuck the Fleet away out of sight" (25) at a place where it could effectively hide itself and still be available to proceed to the operational area assigned to it at short notice. After INS Vikrant had embarked some aircraft to bring her complement up to 18 Seahawks, five Alizes and two Alouettes, the Fleet left Madras on 13 November and reached Port Blair on 17 November. It is interesting to note that the Ghazi sailed from Karachi on 14 November and was off Madras on 23 November.

After the logistic needs of the ships had been met at Port Blair, the Fleet, which now comprised INS Vikrant, INS Kamorta, INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas, withdrew into an even more remote location, Port Cornwallis. This location of the Fleet, while she waited for the hostilities to break out, was one of the most closely guarded secrets of the operations.

Out of the several possible hideouts available for the Fleet in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Port Cornwallis was chosen for the following reasons: Firstly, it was situated near the northern tip of the North Andaman Island and hence the Fleet could reach the operational area in minimum time; secondly, it was almost uninhabited at the time with no means of

communication with the outside world; and thirdly, its lagoon offered adequate natural protection.

At a meeting of the GOC-in-C, Eastern Command, FOC-in-C, Eastern Naval Command and the AOC-in-C, Eastern Air Command held in Calcutta on 1 December, the role of the Eastern Fleet was finalised. It would strike all the ports like Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Chalna, Khulna and Mongla, destroying their airfields, fuel dumps, army camps, coastal shipping, etc(26).

INS Khanderi was the only submarine available for the operations in the Bay of Bengal and was deployed under the direct control of the FOC-in-C, Eastern Naval Command on an offensive patrol across the shipping lanes. The area chosen for the purpose was clear of the operational area of Indian ships. The mission assigned to the submarine was the destruction of Pakistani naval and merchant ships and the provision of timely intelligence on Pak maritime forces.

INS Panvel, which had been fitted with two 40-mm Bofor guns in place of the original single 20-mm Hispano gun, was deployed for patrolling in the Sunderbans area.

### The Battle Commences

On the night of 1/2 December, the Fleet Commander received a signal from the Eastern Naval Command Headquarters directing the Fleet to be ready for sailing from Port Cornwallis by sunset on 2 December. Vikrant received replenishment from INS Magar, improvising a catamaran by placing an LCT between her and the landing ship, and the other ships fuelled from the tanker Desh Deep. On receipt of further orders, INS Vikrant, accompanied by INS Kamorta, INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas sailed for the area of operations at 2200 hrs on 2 December(27).

The Fleet steamed through the Cocos Channel in order to avoid possible detection by the Burmese radar station on Preparis Island, and its passage north was uneventful. However, on 3 December the Fleet's passage crossed some routes of international airways and hence several times during the day aircraft were sighted overhead. In order, therefore, not to lose the all-important element of surprise, it altered course to create an impression of sailing towards Vishakhapatnam whenever an aircraft was within 40 nautical miles, though this resulted in some loss of time. Similar action was resorted to when some merchant ships were encountered.

At 1930 hrs on 3 December, the Fleet was informed of the Pak pre-emptive strike on some Indian airfields and the consequent declaration of hostilities. As had been planned earlier, the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief ordered the Fleet to carry out a strike on Cox's Bazar on the morning of 4 December and thereafter to take up patrol positions in order to intercept Pak merchant ships.

Besides putting the naval bases in East Pakistan out of action, the Eastern Fleet's mission was to ensure that no material help reached the enemy from the sea and nothing left the enemy ports. In order to carry out this task, the Fleet would have to ensure destruction of Pak gunboats and warships, boarding and search of all merchant ships for contraband, taking ships carrying contraband into custody and preventing movement of troop convoys along the coast and in the inland waterways of East Pakistan. In order to render patrolling of the area effective, the Fleet would have to cover a frontage of about 150 nautical miles, and an area of sea extending over 7,500 square miles. To carry out the above tasks, the Fleet Commander had at his disposal the carrier, only two anti-aircraft frigates and two anti-submarine vessels, one of which had to be withdrawn for a while for major repairs(28). Besides, the Fleet operations at high speeds caused abnormally high fuel consumption and so the ships had to be detached in turn during the course of the operations and sent to a home port for refuelling.

4 December. In naval parlance the Seahawks were generally referred to as the 'White Tigers' and the Alizes as the 'Cobras'. "The quick ferocity of one and the stealthy but venomous bite of the other", were demonstrated for the first time in the history of the Indian Navy's Fleet Air Arm when eight Seahawks, armed with guns and rockets, were launched from the flight deck of INS Vikrant at 1030 hrs on 4 December for carrying out an attack on the Cox's Bazar airfield(29). At that time the carrier was only 85 nautical miles from its target and this was the first time that carrier-borne aircraft of the Indian Navy were "striking with anger". During the attack, which took place at 1055 hrs and lasted only a few minutes, several airfield installations, air traffic control tower, power house transformers, W/T installations and oil dumps were set on fire, damaged or destroyed and a number of vehicles on the runway strafed. There was no air opposition. On completion of the attack, the carrier recovered the aircraft and proceeded towards Chittagong for mounting a strike on its heavily fortified airfield which had already been attacked by IAF aircraft earlier in the day.

While INS Vikrant was proceeding to launch this air strike, INS Brahmaputra reported sighting a submarine periscope and picking up a sonar contact in position 20° 35' North, 91° 40' East at 1328 hrs. The submarine was attacked by INS Beas and Alize aircraft from the Vikrant. It was claimed that the submarine surfaced, was engaged by the 4.5-inch guns of INS Beas which shot at its casing and it dived again after transmitting an SOS, its call sign and the words "Bachao, bachao". A large oil patch was later found in this area but no further sonar or visual contact was obtained despite an intensive search.

During this action, the transmissions made by the submarine and its torpedo HE (hydrophone effect, i.e., the noise made by a torpedo's propulsion device) had been picked up by several ships and torpedo tracks were observed by two escorts(30) but the identity of the submarine, damaged or sunk, was never established, and the whole episode remains an unsolved mystery.

At 1515 hrs on 4 December, a strike of eight Seahawks was launched and carried out a devastating attack on Chittagong. This harbour had been fortified with medium and heavy anti-aircraft guns which opened up as soon as the Seahawks approached. But despite their stiff opposition, the White Tigers destroyed or damaged a number of targets. The air traffic control tower, some hangars and other installations of the airfield and a merchant ship secured alongside a jetty were damaged, two gunboats were attacked with rockets, set on fire and presumably sunk, and six merchant ships at anchor or under way were strafed and immobilised, two of them suffering extensive damage.

5 December. It had been planned to carry out another attack on Chittagong at dawn on 5 December and on Chalna, Khulna and Mongla in the afternoon. But the wind velocity on that day was found inadequate for the Seahawks, even with light weapon loads, and hence the Seahawk strikes for the day had to be abandoned and only Alize aircraft were flown.

Several Alize reconnaissance and strike sorties were launched on 5 December. During a reconnaissance mission over Pussur River and Mongla in the afternoon, an Alize sighted a Pakistani tug and a merchant ship, Mini Lady, and carried out an attack with depth charges scoring direct hits. The aircraft also sighted two merchant ships, Ondarda and Tarqueez Mohammed, and carried out a rocket attack on the latter scoring a direct hit.

That night a successful rocket attack was carried out by two Alizes on two gunboats Salamat and Shahbaz, in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire at Mongla, while at Chalna harbour installations were attacked with 500-lb bombs. One merchant ship was hit with rockets at the entrance of Pussur river.

Kavaratti had joined the Fleet at 0900 hrs on 4 December. Kamorta, which needed urgent machinery repairs, was detached from the Fleet at 0700 hrs on 5 December and proceeded to Vishakhapatnam. It was decided that the landing ships INS Gharial and INS Guldar were also to form part of the Eastern Fleet and sailed on the night of 5/6 December, followed by Desh Deep on 7 December. The other ships which had been pressed into service were INS Magar, a landing ship and INS Rajput, a destroyer, both of World War II vintage. INS Magar was capable of only 9 knots and INS Rajput, with only one boiler operational, could do only 15 knots(31).

Having disposed of the submarine within hours of the declaration of hostilities and having carried out successful day and night attacks on the major East Pakistani ports, the Fleet received the following signal from the Eastern Naval Command:-

FROM C-IN-C(.) MOTTO FOR EASTERN FLEET IS "ATTACK - ATTACK - ATTACK."

6 December. A dawn strike by 10 Seahawks and two Alizes was carried out on the Pussur river entrance, Mongla, Chalna and Khulna. An Alize sighted the merchant ship Ondarda entering the Pussur river and attacked her with depth charges. It then attacked a W/T station at the Pussur river entrance. The second Alize also attacked these targets, causing extensive damage.

One division of four Seahawks attacked a gunboat and a tug with rockets and heavily damaged six or seven small craft south of Mongla. They also attacked three other gunboats with front guns, damaging one and setting the other two on fire in spite of anti-aircraft fire from the gunboats and some shore installations.

The second division of Seahawks engaged a merchant ship secured alongside a jetty with rockets. The ship and some harbour installations close to it were damaged. Two gunboats, which had opened fire, were silenced by the aircraft using their front guns.

Two Seahawks carried out an attack on a W/T station and a cargo ship on Pussur river, damaging both.

During a second air strike in the afternoon, an Alize again attacked the merchant ship Ondarda with 500-lb bombs. The ship was hit in the forward part, caught fire, listed to starboard and started sinking. Three Seahawks proceeded to Dohazari and attacked a merchant ship with rockets. The ship returned the fire and was attacked again with front guns. Another strike of Seahawks proceeded to Hathazari and, not finding any suitable target there, moved to the Chittagong airfield and attacked the air traffic control tower. Despite anti-aircraft fire the aircraft also attacked a merchant ship and a gunboat outside Chittagong harbour.

A strike of four Seahawks launched at 1515 hrs attacked army barracks and workshops around the Chittagong naval dockyard with rockets. They also silenced the Patanga coast battery which had opened fire with 12 to 15 anti-aircraft guns and attacked two merchant ships, Mini Labor and Mini Tide, with front guns.

Night operations by Alize aircraft were carried out at 2242 hrs on 6 December and 0130 hrs on 7 December and the runways at Chittagong and Cox's Bazar airfields were again attacked with 500-lb bombs.

Having caused considerable damage to a number of runways and airfield installations in East Pakistan, the Eastern Fleet now received a request from the Eastern Air Command to search for grass landing strips in its area of responsibility, render them unusable and further neutralise runways in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and their satellite airfields by surface bombardment and air strikes.

7 December. A strike of two Seahawks on Cox's Bazar airfield was launched in the morning. They attacked airfield installations, the control tower and a W/T station with rockets and strafed some vehicles on the runway. Another strike of four Seahawks attacked the Chittagong airfield causing extensive damage to the runway. They also strafed a building complex, hangars and fuel dumps, setting the latter ablaze. The Alizes continued to fly on reconnaissance missions.

During the course of the day, intelligence from the Eastern Naval Command indicated that the Pakistani forces in Mongla, Chalna and Khulna had realised that these ports had become untenable and they were being evacuated to Barisal.



8 December. Shortly after midnight on 7/8 December, the carrier launched two Alizes for a night attack on the Cox's Bazar airfield. The aircraft dropped eight 500-lb bombs on the runway and caused considerable damage to it.

The Fleet Commander was now directed to concentrate on Barisal and the area in the vicinity as intelligence further indicated that large concentrations of vessels were taking place between Narayanganj and Barisal and that the enemy was preparing to make a desperate bid to break out to sea, most likely through the Meghna river. Messages from Mukti Bahini commandos in the Chittagong Sector indicated that Pak merchant ships at Chalna were changing their names, funnel markings and flags to foreign ones in preparation for escaping into the Bay of Bengal.

Appropriate steps were taken accordingly to hit Barisal and the Fleet Commander redispensed INS Rajput, INS Brahmaputra, INS Guldar and INS Gharial to different patrol stations and ordered them to intercept and seize all craft, using force if necessary.

9 December. At 0204 hrs, two Alizes carried out a night strike under moonlit conditions on Barisal and bombed the steamer service station. The town was fully lit up when the attack on the waterfront commenced, but was soon darkened. Some boats and jetties on the river bank were damaged. The aircraft then carried out reconnaissance along Arialkhan, Tetulia, Bighai and Bishkhali rivers, but no ship movement was observed.

A strike by six Seahawks was carried out on Barisal, Bakharganj and Patuakhali at 0735 hrs. No craft or army concentration was sighted at the first two places but at Patuakhali three barges and an army camp were attacked and destroyed. Three Seahawks carried out an armed reconnaissance of Meghna river at 0925 hrs but no concentration of craft was observed. An Alize aircraft attacked two tankers off Hatia Island at 1400 hrs. One gunboat was sighted in Meghna river and was attacked but escaped under cover of gunfire. At 1527 hrs four Seahawks carried out an attack on the Chittagong ordnance factory and W/T station. Fairly heavy anti-aircraft fire was experienced around the airfield and one aircraft received a bullet hit but returned to the carrier safely.

10 December. Intelligence had indicated that the Pak forces were likely to mine areas off

Chittagong and Cox's Bazar and the Fleet Commander was directed to prevent this.

Between 0750 hrs and 1515 hrs on 10 December, continuous bombing of Cox's Bazar airfield and installations was carried out by five Alizes as wind conditions were not favourable for Seahawk operations. A total of twenty-six 500-lb bombs were dropped, 14 scoring direct hits on the runway resulting in large craters and rendering the airfield unusable for operations for some days at least.

11 December. For several days after 10 December, the Eastern Fleet had to concentrate on preventing the escape of a mysterious Pak convoy known as RK 623, and foiling the suspected mission of the US Seventh Fleet, which appeared on the scene simultaneously. This episode, described later, required neutralising of Chittagong harbour and airfields, besides detecting and stopping the convoy RK 623. The task of preventing the disguised merchant ships in convoy from escaping from Chittagong under cover of darkness on the night of 11/12 December, and rendering the Chittagong airfield unusable was, however, rendered even more difficult by the non-availability of Seahawk aircraft due to the poor wind conditions, which were likely to continue even on 12 December. It was, therefore, decided to mount night strikes on Chittagong airfield on the night of 11/12 December and carry out daytime surface strikes on Chittagong harbour on 12 December using the gunships of the Fleet, INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas, with the Alize aircraft providing reconnaissance support. These two frigates, which had found a concentration of small craft south of Kutubdia Island earlier in the day and sunk four of them, were to establish a patrol during the night north-west of Cox's Bazar to block the escape routes through the Kutubdia channel. Four other ships, INS Rajput, INS Gharial, INS Guldar and INS Kavaratti were assigned new patrol stations. At 2245 hrs an Alize carried out reconnaissance of the area from 10 nautical miles south of Cox's Bazar to Chittagong and bombed the Chittagong airfield.

12 December. Fortunately for the Fleet, 12 December dawned with ideal wind conditions for the launching of Seahawks, and the air operations mounted by Vikrant on this day resulted in a virtual blitzkrieg on Chittagong and on all the possible escape routes of the enemy, "turning the mission of the mighty US Seventh Fleet into one of utter futility"(32). From 0600 hrs onwards 28 sorties by Seahawks armed with 500-lb bombs and rocket projectiles were mounted. The very first strike made at least 6 direct hits on the runway of Chittagong airfield and rendered it unserviceable. Then four

aircraft attacked two merchant ships while they were leaving harbour and another two inside the harbour scoring many hits. Although one aircraft received a direct hit from AA fire on the canopy, which was shattered, all aircraft returned to the carrier safely.

The runway was once again bombed by four Seahawks and gun positions on the airfield were silenced. The aircraft next attacked three merchant ships off Gupta Point with rockets scoring direct hits on the superstructure. In the afternoon, the Seahawks were back again and scored direct hits on two merchantmen of 10,000 and 15,000 tons each. The last strike of 4 Hawks on 12 December 1971 was launched at 1530 hrs armed with two 500-lb bombs each. Enemy airfield and shipping was once again struck causing heavy damages(33).

At the end of the day's operations, Chittagong airfield and harbour were in shambles. The Fleet Commander reported to the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command that "at the end of twenty four hours of continuous sorties commencing 111930 involving constant Alize recce and bombing and twenty eight Hawk sorties, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong airfields have been rendered inoperable in the near future. There is no merchant ship of any size in Chittagong harbour and approaches which has not been struck and incapacitated. There is a complete absence of shipping along the entire coast from Chalna eastward through Meghna Sandwip up to Cox's Bazar and southward"(34).

INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas had been detailed to carry out surface bombardment of the Chittagong airfield before dawn on 12 December but the operation had to be called off, as it was delayed by the encounter with small craft detected during the night. The ships were, therefore, ordered to proceed to Cox's Bazar and destroy the runway, control tower and hangars at its airfield. The bombardment, which lasted 18 minutes, was carried out in the afternoon, using 260 rounds of 4.5-inch high explosive ammunition and causing considerable damage to the airfield installations.

The bombardment also had a great psychological impact and boosted the morale of the local Mukti Bahini personnel. The Pakistani garrison in the area fled when their Commander, a Squadron Leader of the Pakistan Air Force, who was a local tyrant and who at that time was holding a meeting in the Control Tower area, was killed during the attack. The Mukti Bahini regained control of the area.

13 December. The Fleet Commander received a signal from 4 Corps requesting him to strike enemy bunkers. The carrier was requested to come up on the prescribed communication net and confirm the time of strike. Despite repeated efforts, INS Vikrant failed to establish a wireless link with the 4 Corps till 1030 hrs on 14 December. Three strikes of seven Seahawks were, however, sent between 1345 and 1530 hrs to help the Army, but could not establish communication with the Forward Air Controller. Nor did they sight any troop concentrations and, therefore, returned to the carrier.

Many Seahawk and Alize sorties again visited Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Sandwip Island during 13 December. Ships, AA batteries, an ordnance factory and airfields were hit. But worthwhile targets were now getting scarce.

14 December. A dawn strike of five Seahawks carried out an attack on Chittagong cantonment and army barracks, scoring direct hits on the cantonment complex and the headquarters building. An Alize reconnaissance of the area around Cox's Bazar indicated no movement of troops between Tumone on the Burmese border to six nautical miles of Chiranga and no shipping movement on Pussur river. Two W/T stations were attacked and damaged.

INS Vikrant was now running low on fuel while some other ships of the Fleet needed urgent repairs. Having substantially completed the Fleet's task, INS Vikrant and INS Kamorta were detached and directed to return to Paradeep while INS Kavaratti was ordered to proceed to Vishakhapatnam. The Fleet Commander transferred his flag to INS Brahmaputra to supervise the amphibious landing of troops off Cox's Bazar, and INS Rajput was directed to continue to patrol the sea area and intercept any ship trying to break out from Chittagong or Kutubdia.

There were no further air operations. But the state of war at sea continued and there was no relaxation in the efforts, all offensive and defensive measures and contraband control remaining in force until the surrender by the Pak forces on 16 December.

#### THE US FLEET AND RK 623

By 10 December, the eighth day of the operations, all major ports of East Pakistan had been strafed, bombed and rocketed by aircraft operating from the Vikrant, a large number of ships and craft had been sunk or damaged, and coast batteries, hangars, runways, factories, jetties, etc., had been

destroyed, wholly or partially, and the morale of the Pak naval forces in the East shattered. But on this day two developments of great significance took place which seemed likely to alter the course of naval operations in this theatre.

The first was the news that the formidable Seventh Fleet of the US Navy was speeding towards the Bay of Bengal and was only three to four days' sailing distance away from the operational area. The other was the information obtained from signals intercepted, revealing that a very important convoy of Pak ships - code named RK 623 - was being assembled and would try to escape to Chittagong.

Review of the prevailing situation and these two important developments led to the conclusion that RK 623 was a convoy of disguised vessels carrying Pak senior officers from Rajapur to Chittagong who would then try to escape from Chittagong in some disguised merchant ships under cover of an 'umbrella' of ships and aircraft of the Seventh Fleet.

The US Seventh Fleet consisted of US ships Enterprise, the largest warship afloat in the world at that time, Tripoli, King, Decatur, Parsons and the Tartar Sam. The Enterprise was a nuclear-powered 75,000-ton aircraft carrier, had a maximum speed of 35 knots and a complement of 4,870 personnel including the 2000-strong air wing which operated 100 aircraft from its flight deck. USS Tripoli was a 17,000-ton amphibious assault ship, had a sustained speed of 20 knots, carried 24 medium, four heavy and four observation helicopters and was capable of transporting and landing a marine battalion of 2,100 officers and men along with their arms, ammunition and equipment. The King was a guided missile frigate fitted with surface-to-air missiles and torpedoes while the other three ships were guided missile destroyers which were also armed with surface-to-air missiles.

The Pak authorities were aware of the fact that the Vikrant was by now running low on fuel. Her withdrawal for replenishment would mean a 48-hour absence from the operational area during which there would be better prospects for a successful breakout. For this purpose, the Pak forces were likely to assemble at Chittagong, embark troops on camouflaged ships, and lay minefields to thwart ships of the Indian Navy from approaching the harbour after leaving a narrow channel hugging the coast southwards for the passage of the escaping ships.

The formidable Seventh Fleet could provide more

than adequate support to the Pak forces by attacking ships of the Eastern Fleet, using its aircraft to support the Pak Army in East Pakistan or landing a marine battalion in support of the Pak Army. But none of these courses of action was considered likely as it would be tantamounting to declaration of war against India in defiance of US public opinion. And also, in the words of a senior naval officer, "That might mean the end of the world, or the Americans would find in us a Vietnam to end all Vietnams"(35).

Perhaps it was another instance of the old gunboat diplomacy or sabre-rattling to unnerve India and to rescue the Pak forces in the area. The official explanation of the purpose was the evacuation of US personnel. Nobody believed it.

In his book, 'The White House Years', Dr. Henry A. Kissinger admits that "an aircraft carrier task force that we had alerted previously was now ordered to move towards the Bay of Bengal ostensibly for the evacuation of Americans but in reality to give emphasis to our warnings against an attack on West Pakistan"(36).

However, after considering all possible courses of action that were open to the Pak authorities in East Pakistan and the Seventh Fleet, the conclusion reached was that the Pakistanis had made all preparations for the convoy RK 623 of camouflaged small vessels to escape to Chittagong with senior Pak officers and VIPs, and from Chittagong they would all try to escape on merchant ships lying there. These ships could sneak away either under cover of darkness while Vikrant was away for replenishment, or would be escorted away by the Seventh Fleet under its air umbrella. Though there was no conclusive proof that the RK 623 operation was tied up with the entry of the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal, the circumstantial evidence of the possible linkage between the two was too telling to be ignored. If, therefore, the Pak efforts to escape, with or without the support of the Seventh Fleet, was to be brought to nought, it was of vital importance that RK 623, the fleet of camouflaged vessels, was located and destroyed as soon as possible and all installations in the Pak ports, airports and harbours which could be used to facilitate such escape destroyed. The C-in-C of the Eastern Naval Command, therefore, made the following signal to the Fleet Commander on 11 December:-

- "1. Appreciate enemy with senior officers including FOCEP (Flag Officer Commanding East Pakistan) planning major break-out

tonight and will probably attempt getaway by hugging coast. Senior officers may try to escape by air. Approach to harbour likely to be mined.

"2. Your mission is :

'A'. To put Chittagong airport out of commission.

'B'. Attack ships by both air and surface units in harbour and if they break out.

'C'. Outer and inner Kutubdia Channel may be mined by you using minimum ship count if you think fit.

"3. This is probably the most important mission of the war in the East. The enemy must be destroyed. Good luck."

It was, therefore, necessary to destroy RK 623 at the first available opportunity. Since 11 December was a 'no wind day', Seahawks could not be launched and only Alizes could be used for strikes. An Alize launched at 0600 hrs had already bombed Rajapur where RK 623 was suspected to be hiding, and carried out reconnaissance of Barisal, the Meghna river and Dakhin Shahbazpur.

Another Alize was launched at 1000 hrs on a reconnaissance strike mission and spotted a tiny island in position 21° 48' North, 90° 07' East, which appeared to be moving! It went into a dive to take a closer look and its crew soon realised that the 'island' was actually a gunboat (later identified as PNS Jessore), a tug and some barges in close formation, which had been camouflaged with green shrubbery and mud and were armed with an array of anti-aircraft guns. This was the elusive RK 623. A rocket and depth charge attack was mounted by two Alizes. The vessels opened fire, but were soon silenced and forced to beach themselves. One of the Alizes received six bullet hits but succeeded in returning to the carrier by the extraordinary skill of the pilot(37).

Another Alize launched at 1135 hrs sighted two dhows carrying concealed cargo suspected to be troops and attacked them with depth charges causing extensive damage(38).

## BEARDING THE LION

### Naval Commando Operation

A special commando operation was executed by a force known as Force Alpha comprising INS Panvel under the command of Lieutenant Commander J.P.A. Noronha, and three other vessels, MV Chitrangada (Lieutenant Commander G.D. Mukherjee) of the Border Security Force and Padma and Palash of the Calcutta Port Trust. The operation was jointly undertaken by personnel of the Indian Navy and the Mukti Bahini(39). Padma and Palash had been fitted with two 40-mm anti-aircraft guns each, and were commanded by Lieutenant S.K. Mitra and Lieutenant Commander J.K. Roy Choudhury of the Indian Navy respectively(40). The operation was carried out under the overall command of Commander M.N. Samant.

On the morning of 8 December the two gunboats Padma and Palash joined INS Panvel at Sandeshkali. The three ships sailed in company and at 1100 hrs the Force entered Bangladesh at Shamshernagar on the Jamuna river. At about 1725 hrs they sighted the slower MV Chitrangada which had been sailed in advance and was now at anchor in Garani Khal. All ships anchored at this point and at 2330 hrs, when the moon came up, they weighed anchor and proceeded towards Akram Point on Pussur river, which they reached at midnight. While the ships were under way, they sighted two merchant ships at a range of about 5,500 metres heading towards the sea at full speed and hence the Force signalled a report on the fleeing ships to the Fleet Commander. These two ships, which were identified as Pak merchantmen Anwar Baksh and Baqir, were later captured by the Eastern Fleet in the Bay of Bengal.

The ships of the force returned to Garani Khal on the morning of 9 December, re-entered Pussur river in the evening and anchored off Mongla for the night.

At 0530 hrs on 10 December, the ships weighed anchor and sailed into Mongla harbour. They found that most of the merchant ships at anchor were ablaze, as also the Pakistani pilot vessel CPV Ansar and Pak merchant ships SS Makran, SS Ocean Enterprise and another ship, masquerading as foreign ships Dora, Ceandete and Rigoletto respectively. INS Panvel went alongside CPV Ansar while Padma, Palash and Chitrangada went alongside other ships, sent boarding parties and broke open the safes that contained classified records such as plans, codes, cyphers, etc. But these had already been destroyed. Some documents were, however, salvaged from these ships and taken on board.



Some senior officers of the Force landed ashore at Mongla and were cheered by a large crowd which had gathered on the jetty. It was found that the Pak forces had already left the place and two Pak naval officers had been taken prisoner by the Mukti Bahini.

Commander M.N. Samant, the Force Commander, then ordered INS Panvel, Padma and Palash to proceed to Khulna. The fourth ship, MV Chitragada, was ordered to stay back at Mongla for salvage and rearguard operations, if required. Accordingly, the first three ships sailed from Mongla at 0820 hrs on 10 December and arrived at Khulna at 1120 hrs.

### Tragedy of Mistaken Identity

At 1135 hrs, three IAF Gnat aircraft appeared overhead at Khulna. There appeared no cause for worry since all ships displayed large (4.5 metres by 3 metres) yellow pieces of cloth on top of their bridges as recognition signals, as previously arranged. However, to everyone's surprise, while one of the Gnats circled overhead, the other two gained height and suddenly dived towards the ships to carry out an attack.

Padma was hit amid ships by the first aircraft in its first rocket attack and burst into flames. Within seconds, this was followed by the second aircraft hitting Palash between her funnel and gun-mounting, as a result of which her stern caught fire. Palash quickly headed for the starboard bank and beached while members of her crew abandoned the ship by diving into the river or jumping ashore.

The third Gnat now dived and attacked INS Panvel with rockets but missed her narrowly as the ship zigzagged vigorously and manoeuvred in the channel.

Within a few minutes, the ships were again subjected to heavy strafing by the aircraft. Palash was hit by rockets for the second time and members of her crew were strafed while they were trying to take shelter ashore. INS Panvel again had a miraculous escape from the Gnat's cannon fire.

At this time the ships were subjected to intermittent small arms fire from the bank. Commander M.N. Samant, the force Commander, then ordered the ships to be abandoned. INS Panvel continued to manoeuvre herself for some more time and proceeded to the port bank and the crew was ordered to abandon ship.

On completion of the air attack, the three aircraft disappeared over the horizon but several men

of the militia ashore were observed to take up positions with their arms while some others tried to intercept and capture the crew who had abandoned the ship. The crew was immediately ordered to return on board INS Panvel which then pulled herself out and proceeded to rescue survivors of the other two gunboats.

Some survivors of Palash were found swimming in mid-channel and were promptly picked up. Padma was still ablaze and all members of her crew had abandoned the ship. Three officers, Lieutenants S.K. Mitra and J.V. Natu and Sub Lieutenant A.K. Bandopadhyay who had swum ashore were taken prisoner by the Pak forces and came back to India after the surrender.

At this stage a second wave of three Gnat aircraft appeared overhead and INS Panvel, instead of manoeuvring herself in midstream, decided to beach on the starboard bank and ordered the crew to abandon ship and seek safety ashore. The aircraft, however, spared the ships, carried out attacks on ground installations and soon returned. Panvel extricated herself from the bank and proceeded to rescue six more survivors, two of whom died on board due to severe shock and loss of blood.

#### Attack on Harbour Installations

The three Gnat aircraft paid a third visit a little later, attacked ground installations and the beaching operations were repeated. After the aircraft had disappeared and the crew had returned on board, the ship was extricated from the muddy bank for the third time and proceeded to carry out the task assigned to her and attacked ground installations in Khulna. During the attack she came under heavy small arms and machine gun fire from buildings on either side of the waterway but effectively neutralised them with her Bofors, machine guns, and small arms. As a result, the police headquarters, Khulna shipyard steel mills, gun emplacements, fortifications, the bungalow of the notorious collaborator Sabur Khan, etc., were either severely damaged or razed to the ground.

After the engagement was over, the ship returned to pick up the remaining survivors and a few members of the crew who had remained ashore and sailed for Hasnabad where she arrived at 1845 hrs on 11 December. She left Hasnabad on 21 December and reached Calcutta on 23 December.

The impact of this operation would have been considerably greater if the ships had not been attacked so effectively by India's own air force. It

appears that initially an attack on Mongla and Chalna only had been planned, and Headquarters Eastern Command had informed the air force authorities that the recognition signal to be displayed by the vessels of the task force would be a large yellow flag draped across the top of the bridge. When, however, the task force reached Mongla, it found that its mission of destroying ships in harbour and shore installations had already been accomplished by the IAF and the saboteurs of the Mukti Bahini. Commander Samant, therefore, decided to proceed to Khulna, and informed Headquarters Eastern Command accordingly. The information, however, does not seem to have reached the IAF authorities in time, resulting in the vessels at Khulna being taken for Pak naval units and attacked despite the display of the yellow flag.

### CONTRABAND CONTROL AND BLOCKADE

In accordance with International Law, the orders issued regarding contraband control and blockade of East Pakistan were: all ships, neutral or enemy, found proceeding to East Pakistan ports were to be intercepted; all ships belonging to the enemy and armed, even if these were merchant ships, were to be destroyed; all merchant ships encountered were to be challenged, boarded and checked for contraband; if a neutral ship was intercepted and found not carrying contraband, an undertaking was to be obtained from the master of the ship to the effect that he would not visit any East Pakistan port and would not carry any contraband to and from East Pakistan and that any violation of this undertaking would be treated as a hostile act; if contraband was found on board a neutral ship, she was to be escorted or directed to proceed to the nearest Indian port where the detaining officer would arrange to offload the contraband; if any resistance was offered by any ship, force was to be used; if the ship intercepted was an enemy ship and she resorted to any hostile act endangering Indian Naval ships or personnel, this was to be neutralised with all available force and, if necessary the enemy ship was to be destroyed(41).

On 4 December 1971, a blockade of the coast of East Pakistan was declared from 1400 hrs. The line of blockade was from position 21° 43.5' North, 89° 5.75' East to 20° 43' North 92° 21.7' East. All neutral ships within the blockaded area were to be allowed to pass until the time from which the blockade was made effective. Contraband control was also instituted from 1400 hrs on 4 December. The blockade which was later lifted by the Naval Headquarters, (42) and

contraband control led to the seizure of 13 ships between 4 December and 11 December.

A few minutes before midnight on 5 December, INS Brahmaputra picked up two surface contacts which were later identified as the two Greek ships of Liberian registry, Mini Lad and Mini Loaf in position 20° 30' North, 90° 20' East. On investigation, it was found that the ships were carrying contraband and had been chartered to agents in East Pakistan. Both ships were, therefore, seized as prizes and on the morning of 6 December, INS Kavaratti escorted them to Sandheads(43)

At about 1600 hrs on the same day, the Fleet picked up a group of contacts in position 21° 5' North 91° 29' East. INS Beas was ordered to investigate and she apprehended six ships - Gulf Zain, Tina Christiansen, Gulf Crescent, Gulf Princess, Gulf Trader and Gulf Navigator. All ships had Danish crews and were carrying contraband, having been chartered to the Gulf Shipping Corporation of Pakistan. The ships were, therefore, seized as prizes and boarding parties placed on three of them(44). Beas started escorting the ships to an Indian port. The ships were later handed over to INS Rajput who escorted them to Sandheads.

On 9 December, the Fleet picked up some more surface contacts in position 21° 10' North, 89° 40' East. INS Beas and INS Kavaratti were ordered to investigate these contacts. Kavaratti found her contacts to be the Pakistani ships Baqir and the Liberian freighter Voleon which was keeping close company with Baqir. These ships were seized and escorted to Paradip and then to Sandheads in INS Beas and later by INS Kamorta(45).

The contacts investigated by INS Beas were found to be four tugs which were completely darkened. When they were challenged by INS Beas, one of them started replying, 'Paki\_\_\_\_' and then quickly changed it to 'Panamanian'. The tugs thereafter continued to evade the Indian frigate and refused to comply with her orders, and hence Beas opened fire and sank one of them following which the other tugs surrendered. Twenty survivors of the crew of the four tugs which were later identified as Shall Be, Should Be, Maggie Be and Lydia Be, were picked up by INS Kavaratti and later transferred to INS Vikrant. These were Thai vessels on charter to Pakistan.

Of the 20 survivors, 13 were wounded, six of them seriously. One of them was dangerously wounded with a shell which had entered the left chest and had lodged itself near the heart. An operation for the removal of the shell was carried out and the patient gradually recovered. Another survivor, however, suffered a heart attack and expired. A proper sea burial was given to the deceased. The rest of the survivors were handed over to the civil authorities at Paradip on 17 December(46).

At about 1330 hrs on 6 December an Alize anti-submarine aircraft launched by INS Vikrant sighted a Pak merchant ship Mini Aemtop (Mini Labor) near Kutubdia and attacked her with rockets. The ship suffered severe damage and was abandoned by the crew(47).

Mini Labor was later apprehended by INS Gharial in position 20° 50' North, 91° 35' East. A boarding party from the Vikrant was sent on board and the ship was found to have been abandoned(48). The engine room was found flooded and the ship's side holed due to rocket and bullet hits. The boarding party anchored the ship and accorded sea burial to one dead body found on board. Eventually INS Rajput had to tow this ship into Vishakhapatnam on 26 December(49).

At about 1750 hrs on 9 December, INS Rajput intercepted a contact in position 21° 10' North, 89° 18' East. On being challenged, the ship replied that she was a Japanese ship, Azuchisam Maru, and was bound from Chittagong to Singapore. A boarding party sent to the ship found that it was a Pakistani vessel, and her real name was Anwar Baksh. She had on board 56 Pakistani nationals including 17 Pak soldiers. The ship was, therefore, seized and escorted to Sandheads by INS Rajput(50).

During the passage to Sandheads the hostile Pak troops turned violent and threatened to attack. The members of the boarding party distinguished themselves by controlling the rebellion and by the time Anwar Baksh reached Haldia, she had a number of casualties on board.

The Anwar Baksh incident has been dramatically described by Vice Admiral N. Krishnan who quotes the report of Lt Commander R. Bajaj, Officer-in-Charge of the boarding party, as under:

"At about 2215 hrs, I received a report that arms were hidden in the officers saloon where I had allowed officers to sleep. At that time, I thought that most probably my two sentries there

had possibly already been overpowered. I went down to the fore-part of the ship where Army Jawans and the crew were under guard. I asked the Army Jawans who their leader was. One man stepped forward. I told him to stand by the guard rail on the port side. The remainder 16 jawans were approximately 20 feet from me. They were in truculent mood and mutinous. I asked these men where are the arms on board Anwar Baksh. The answer was in chaste Urdu but extremely rude. I fired one shot in the air and questioned him again. Before he could make a reply all of the Army Jawans rushed on me shouting "Allah Ho Akbar". I shot the leader in the stomach, put my sten gun to rapid fire and shot at the men who were rushing at me. The leading man of the group fell dead at my feet. The firing did not last more than 5 seconds"(51).

On 11 December INS Kavaratti intercepted two ships in position 20° 24' North, 90° 36' East. These were the Greek ship Trias and the American ship Robert E. Lee and were taken to the assembly anchorage which had been established for all captured ships. INS Rajput had been positioned at the anchorage and took them over from INS Kavaratti on their arrival(52). After investigations Robert E. Lee was released but the Trias was found to be carrying 13 Pakistani nationals. INS Rajput, therefore, put a boarding party on board the Trias and escorted her to Sandheads.

Several other neutral ships were challenged at sea and when on investigation it was found that they were not carrying contraband, they were released and allowed to proceed to their destination. These included the American ship Buck Eye State intercepted off Chittagong on 4 December, the Greek ship Achios Stylanos and the Russian ship Nasagyadok intercepted in the North Bay by INS Rajput, the Greek ships Taxiarchis and Katerina intercepted in the North Bay by INS Guldar on 9 December, Singapore merchant ship Golden Wonder, Somalian merchant ship Prosperity intercepted in the North Bay by INS Gharial on 9 December, and the Monrovia merchant ship Volehl intercepted on 13 December(53)

Nine merchant ships in the eastern ports were found to be carrying contraband for Pakistan. The contraband was offloaded and the ships were released. These ships include the Liberian merchant ship Monoloeverett, Czechoslovak merchant ship Republica, Netherlands merchant ship Abbekerik, Polish merchant ship Stanis Landubois, Yugoslav merchant ship Kumrovec

and British merchant ship, City of Worcester.

The cargo offloaded from the ships at Calcutta included 1000 tonnes of electrical goods, 300 tonnes of motor vehicle parts, drugs and medicines, 1930 tonnes of vehicles, milk powder, chemicals and electronic equipment, 3233 tonnes of foodgrains and 1422 tonnes of steel, jute machinery and drilling rig equipment(54).

Contraband control and blockade of East Pakistan had been enforced with effect from 1400 hrs on 4 December but Naval Headquarters soon realised the impracticability and undesirability of enforcing a blockade with the limited resources available(55). The orders were, therefore, modified to exclude blockade and enforce contraband control only. Naval Headquarters had also imposed an embargo on attacks on merchant ships in enemy ports which placed severe limitations on air operations(56). Still, a comparatively small force comprising the few ships of the Eastern Fleet was able to enforce effective contraband control and a de facto blockade of the East Pakistani Coast. This was largely made possible by the absence of Pakistani major units in this area, the sinking of the Ghazi and the devastating attacks on 4 December on Cox's Bazar and Chittagong and on 15 December on Mingla, Chalna and Khulna.

Only one Pak ship appears to have slipped through the cordon sanitaire and escaped to Akyab. To quote Major General Fazaal Muqueem Khan, "PNS Rajshahi made a heroic and spectacular escape against great odds and through the heavily mined and extensively patrolled water approaches by the Indian Navy off Chittagong harbour. The Captain of the Rajshahi Lieutenant Sikandar Hayat took the daring step and his gallant crew responded", and fled successfully(57).

#### OPERATION BEAVER

The first amphibious landing by ships of the Indian Navy had been carried out in 1947 during the Junagadh Operations(58). The second time such operations were carried out in the history of the Navy was during the 1971 Operations when troops were landed off Cox's Bazar in order to cut off the possible escape routes of Pak personnel to Burma. It was planned to bring the troops along with arms, ammunition, stores, vehicles, etc., to the selected area on board a merchant ship from Calcutta, transfer them to landing ships and craft of the Indian Navy, and then land them at a suitable site.

The participants in the amphibious operation were INS Brahmaputra, INS Beas and INS Rajput as the support force, INS Magar to be used for transporting fuel and stores, INS Gharial and INS Guldar as the landing ships, Vishva Vijay the merchant ship requisitioned for the purpose of carrying personnel from Calcutta, and one brigade of the Army and one company of the Naval Garrison, to be landed at Raju Creek of Cox's Bazar(59).

On 13 December some personnel and stores for this Operation Beaver were transferred from the flagship, INS Vikrant to INS Gharial. These included the Fleet Gunnery Officer, the Carrier Borne Ground Liaison Officer and communication sailors. The landing was scheduled for 14/15 December and a suitable 'H' hour had been selected(60)

INS Gharial rendezvoused with Vishva Vijay which had arrived from Calcutta, at about 0230 hrs on 14 December and, under the supervision of the Commanding Officer of INS Brahmaputra, the transfer of the first wave of about 250 troops along with their stores, vehicles, arms and ammunition from Vishva Vijay to INS Gharial commenced. The leading ship had secured alongside Vishva Vijay and, after discussions held on board the merchant ship and later on board INS Brahmaputra, it was decided to postpone the H hours to 0530 hrs on 15 December.

INS Guldar, the other landing ship, had also secured alongside the Vishva Vijay at 0410 hrs on 14 December. She too embarked about 250 personnel along with stores, vehicles, artillery pieces, ammunition and rations(61).

Immediately after midnight on 14/15 December, the two landing ships cast off and proceeded towards Raju Creek and arrived there at first light. There was no difficulty in locating the beaching point as Lieutenant Commander G. Martis, an experienced naval diver, and his team had been landed by INS Brahmaputra earlier to carry out a survey of the beach and had marked the channel by placing two red pallets.

The amphibious force was to proceed to the beach-head anchorage south of Raju Creek which was the nearest point to the main road. It was the most suitable point to cut off the escape of enemy troops to Burma.

As Gharial approached the beaching point, her bows touched a sand bar about 180 metres from the waterfront. The bow doors were opened and a rope was passed ashore where it was secured to a crow-bar dug



into the sand. The jawans were then directed to proceed ashore with the help of the rope.

Then the difficulties started. It was found that for some distance the depth of the water was 2.5 metres and most of the jawans found it difficult to negotiate it. The sea conditions had also worsened and there were regular and unrelenting breakers 2.5 metres high. As a result of the first wave sent ashore two men were drowned. The operations were, therefore, called off for the time being, the personnel landed ashore brought back on board on make-shift life-rafts and the ship hauled back and anchored.

After reassessing the situation, it was decided by the Fleet Commander that it was imperative for the troops to land and intercept the fleeing Pak forces even if it risked the landing ships. INS Gharial was, therefore, asked to attempt beaching once again. As she did so, surf and breakers began pounding the ship's hull which began to dig into the sand bar. With the ship embedded on the beach, it was not possible to land troops. In heavy swell and breakers all available means at the disposal of the ship were adopted to refloat her. As INS Gharial started heaving in on her anchor, the anchor wire parted and the anchor was lost. A 6-inch braided nylon rope was then passed to INS Guldar from the stern of INS Gharial to pull her out. The nylon rope also parted within a few minutes. Another line was passed to INS Gharial and efforts to pull her out were resumed. Every time Gharial rose with the surf, excellent coordination between the crew handling the tow rope, stern anchor wire and the engine giving short but quick bursts of power eventually pulled Gharial out and refloated her.

On the same morning, INS Guldar also made an attempt to land troops. The stern anchor was dropped in 5 metres of water near Raju Creek, the cable was paid out and then the bower anchor was dropped. Sounding of water, however, indicated that the gradient was too shallow and hence the ship withdrew from the area and decided to attempt beaching at another spot. But before she could do that, she had to assist in refloating INS Gharial as described earlier.

It was then decided to land the troops in boats. One platoon of troops was landed ashore by the boats of INS Brahmaputra and INS Beas. By late evening on the same day, the platoon reached Cox's Bazar and reported that there were no Pak forces there and that Mukti Bahini forces had assumed command. All

mechanised boats available with the Mukti Bahini were, therefore, requisitioned and the ships proceeded to anchor off Cox's Bazar. Ferrying ashore the troops and stores from Vishva Vijay by the boats continued till the morning of 19 December.

The landing operation was confined to daylight hours only and at appropriate states of tide. Insufficient data on the landing sites and unexpected sea conditions in the area had rendered landing troops and handling boats extremely difficult and hazardous. But the ships participating in the amphibious operation were successful in landing about 1200 troops with store, arms, ammunition and other equipment(62).

It appears that even an unopposed landing got into serious trouble. In fact, the Eastern Command After Action Report described it as abortive. It stated: "'Romeo' Force was hurriedly assembled and sailed off on the morning of 12 December. A Naval contingent of 150 which was to participate did not fetch up.

"On 14 December, the force was transferred to INS Guldar and Gharial. As all planning had been done off the map, actual survey of the beach was carried out on arrival. There were no suitable landing crafts. The LSTs would not beach. One of the LSTs tried to beach and disembark the troops. The LST beached on a runnel. Only 12 men could disembark and 2 out of these got drowned. With another effort 30 men were put ashore"(63).

If anything, the episode illustrated the overriding necessity for integrated training and planning. Amphibious operation in modern warfare is too complicated a business to be left to hasty improvisations.

## CONCLUSION

### Achievements

The Eastern Fleet, the glorified nomenclature assigned to a fledgling force no bigger than a task group, undertook practically all types of maritime operations, viz., carrier air operations for strike, reconnaissance and Army cooperation missions, blockade and contraband control, anti-submarine operations, surface bombardment, amphibious landing and limited surface action during the 14-day war. Such a variety of activities by maritime forces were probably being witnessed in a single theatre of naval operations for the first time since World War II (64).

This Fleet had been formed during the final stages of the preparatory phase of the operations and consisted of a 'motley' assortment of ships, some of which were recent acquisitions while some others were very old and had limited operational capability. For example, though INS Kamorta, INS Kavaratti and INS Khanderi had been acquired as recently as 1969, INS Kavaratti had to operate with no anti-submarine dome and INS Khanderi had limited battery cycles left. The sonar equipment on board INS Brahmaputra, which was 13 years old, was non-operational; INS Beas, acquired in 1960, had a defective port shaft; INS Rajput, which was of World War II vintage, had only one boiler operational and could operate her guns only in local control; and INS Vikrant, acquired in 1961, had a speed restriction because of defective boilers, and carried aircraft which did not compare favourably with the Sabres that the PAF had in East Pakistan. Besides these handicaps, there were limitations of logistic support, many aspects of which were virtually conducted on a shoe-string basis in an area of responsibility covering several thousand square miles(65).

Some of the more important factors that contributed to the Eastern Naval Command's success in the Battle of the Bay were: careful analysis and planning of all aspects of the operations - logistic support, operational state of ships, training exercises and work up during the preparatory and precautionary phases; close liaison and cooperation between the three Commands of the Army, Navy and Air Force and "the gusto, bravery, determination and superb devotion to duty" of the personnel that manned its ships and establishments.

At least equally important was the factor of complete air supremacy achieved by the IAF in the Eastern Theatre. By eliminating the PAF Sabres, the IAF enabled the Seahawks and Alizés to operate freely without worrying about any air threat to the Vikrant or its aircraft. And of course, there were no major surface vessels of the Pakistan Navy in the East to pose any threat to the Eastern Fleet, small though it was.

During the "naval air operations", the carrier had 15 pilots for 18 Seahawks, eight pilots for the five Alizés and two pilots for the two helicopters on board. Between 03 December and 16 December, these pilots flew a total of 291 sorties out of which 123 were flown by the Seahawks, 70 by the Alizés and 98 by the helicopters. Besides using their front guns, these aircraft dropped a total of 151 500-lb bombs, 694 rockets and 22 depth charges on enemy targets,

ashore and afloat. As a result, out of a total of 31 ships and coasters attacked, 14 were destroyed or heavily damaged, and out of 17 gunboats attacked, six were sunk or put out of action(66). While carrying out these operations, the carrier aircraft located 12 merchant ships which were seized as they were attempting to escape from East Pakistan ports.

Mention also must be made here of the contribution of signal intelligence towards the eventual success of the operations. The enemy's signal code had been broken by naval personnel within a few days of the commencement of hostilities and there were timely and frequent signal intercepts that gave the latest information on the situation and the enemy's plans.

The successful blockade, devastation of ports and harbours, and prevention of the enemy forces from escaping from East Pakistan significantly facilitated the ground operations. Lt Gen J.S. Aurora, GOC-in-C of the Eastern Command, while addressing the personnel of the carrier after the operations, acknowledged the significance of the Eastern Naval Command's achievements by the generous statement that it had "reduced the task of the Army threefold in the Eastern Sector"(67).

After the completion of the surrender ceremony at Dhaka on 16 December, as related by Vice Admiral N. Krishnan, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, another little drama took place. The Flag Officer Commanding East Pakistan, as he was called, Rear Admiral (Mohammed) Sharif approached me, and hiding emotions in a gallant effort said "Admiral Krishnan, Sir, soon I will be disarmed. Your Navy fought magnificently and had us cornered everywhere. I would like to surrender my arms to the C-in-C of the Eastern Fleet", and unbelting his holster, handed over his Chinese-made revolver and clip of ammunition"(68).

The other senior naval officers who surrendered were Commodore K.M. Hussain, Commodore-in-Charge, Chittagong, and Commodore I.H. Malik, Managing Director of the Chittagong Port Trust. A total of 97 naval officers and about 1,312 sailors surrendered in East Pakistan including one Rear Admiral, two Commodores, three Captains, 12 Commanders and 67 junior officers(69).

Six merchant ships, MV Andaman, MV Nicobar, Indian Merchant, Vishva Vijay, Jala Vishnu and Jagmanec, were requisitioned by the Indian Navy after the war for the transportation of prisoners of war to India and between 30 December 1971 and 7 January 1972,

12,708 PsOW were transferred in these ships from various ports in Bangladesh to Calcutta(70).

### Mutual Assistance

During the course of the operations, the IAF flew 25 sorties of HS-748 aircraft and 10 sorties of Dakota aircraft for MR in support of the Eastern Fleet(71).

The carrier flew 23 Seahawk sorties in support of the Army and carried out attacks on selected Army targets. There were occasions, however, when aircraft from the Vikrant failed to provide air support because proper communication with the Forward Air Controller (FAC) could not be established(72).

Attacks on enemy targets carried out by aircraft from the Vikrant, especially those located close to other buildings occupied by civilians, were extremely accurate and hence there was no unnecessary loss of life and property. This was illustrated by the attack on the Cox's Bazar ATC on 4 December which killed Moinddeun Rehman, a notorious Pak agent and his collaborators, but did not harm the adjoining buildings, the strike on the Dohazari W/T station and other enemy positions located very close to the American Mission Hospital and a bridge, and destruction of a W/T station in a railway building at Chittagong(73).

### Technical Problems

There were several limitations under which the carrier had to operate during the war. Besides the restrictions on the carrier's speed, poor surface winds in the area did not allow the launching of Seahawks on four days. On several other days, rather than cancelling the launch, the armament load was proportionally reduced during the earlier strikes. "As the operations progressed the carrier gradually closed to a distance of only 65 miles (104 Km) south of Chittagong, where the depth was hardly 12 fathoms (approximately 22 metres, to launch aircraft with maximum possible load under marginal wind conditions"(74).

Several emergencies were experienced by the aircrew and carrier personnel but they rose to the occasion every time without the loss of a single aircraft, life or limb.

While carrying out strikes on the selected targets, a number of Seahawks and Alizes received bullet hits. Two Seahawks had their forward

windscreens shattered, virtually blinding the pilots; one Seahawk suffered damage to its elevator control; an Alize sustained seven bullet hits causing hydraulic and electrical failure; and two Seahawks suffered a drop in oil pressure below the acceptable limit. But all these aircraft were nursed back to the carrier and landed on the flight deck without any further damage.

On one occasion, while some aircraft were airborne, a lift on the flight deck got stuck two metres below the level of the deck. Since the aircraft had only a few minutes' fuel left, they were advised to prepare to ditch. Fortunately, when the aircraft had only five minutes endurance left, the defect was rectified and the lift brought up to deck level. To prevent the recurrence of such an emergency, the lift was subsequently kept up in the fully locked position whenever aircraft were airborne.

### Awards

The operations in the Bay of Bengal earned the Eastern Fleet five MVCs. Captain Swaraj Parkash, AVSM, Commanding Officer of INS Vikrant, was decorated for the air operations which devastated all major ports in East Pakistan and denied the enemy the use of the sea and inland waterways. Commander M.N. Samant, Senior Officer of Force Alpha, received the MVC for the daring attacks on the river ports of Khulna and Mongla. Lieutenant Commander S.K. Gupta, a Seahawk pilot on board the carrier, was rewarded for displaying outstanding leadership in leading a total of 11 strike missions on enemy ships and heavily defended shore facilities with devastating effect. Lieutenant Commander J.P.A. Noronha, Commanding Officer of INS Panvel, was decorated for handling his ships so well in very restricted waters and for silencing the shore defences. The fifth person to receive the MVC was Leading Seaman C. Singh, a Clearance Diver, who was on board the Padma. Despite being wounded by shrapnel and in the face of a small arms barrage from the shore, he rescued two of his shipmates, who had jumped into the river when their boat sank, and helped them in making good their escape by rushing at the enemy on reaching the shore.

### NAVAL OPERATIONS DURING THE WAR - A RETROSPECT

Free India's Navy, which was blooded in war during the 1971 operations, did exceedingly well in both theatres of operations - Eastern and Western. The two bold attacks on Karachi bottling up the entire Pak surface fleet, the severance of the maritime link between the two wings of Pakistan, the attrition of Pak occupation forces in its Eastern Wing in which the

aircraft carrier played a magnificent role, and the contraband control effectively enforced in the Arabian Sea as well as in the Bay of Bengal, greatly contributed to the shattering of the morale of the Pak armed forces and Government.

During the process, ships and aircraft of the Indian Navy sank one Pak destroyer (PNS Khaibar), one minesweeper (PNS Muhafiz), one submarine (PNS Ghazi), three patrol craft (PNS Jessore, PNS Comilla and PNS Sylhet) and 14 converted gunboats and damaged one tanker (PNS Dacca). It is assessed that, along with these surface vessels and submarine, the Pak Navy lost about 55 officers and 430 sailors(75).

The Indian Navy lost only one Frigate (INS Khukri) and one aircraft (an Alize) engaged in tactical reconnaissance in the West. The Indian Naval personnel lost included 20 officers and 180 sailors.

During the missile attacks on Karachi harbour, besides the naval ships and harbour installations that were destroyed or damaged, two merchant ships, the Liberian Venus Challenger (10,065 tons) and the Panamanian Gulf Star (1280 tons) were sunk and a third, the British Harmattan (10,411 tons), was damaged(76). In the East, thirteen merchant ships with a total tonnage of about 94,000 tons were sunk during the war(77). These included five Pak ships - Surma (5,890 tons), Anis Baksh (6,273 tons), Karnaphuli (9,123 tons), Al Abbas (8,559 tons) and Rangamati (8,909 tons), one Danish ship, African Proctor, four Greek ships - Thetis (2,276 tons), Mastro Stelios (8,823 tons), Avlios (11,237 tons) and Chrysovalandou (8,151 tons), one Swedish ship Star Altair (8,962 tons), one Spanish ship, Ondarda (8,259 tons) and one Somalian ship, Lightning (7,046 tons). Eight merchant ships belonging to Pakistan, Denmark, Liberia and New Zealand were damaged. Besides these, 36 small craft (35 Pakistani and one Dutch) were sunk and 18 damaged in East Pakistan.

The contraband control and blockade measures adopted in the two theatres of operations yielded excellent results. Seven merchant ships owned or chartered by Pak shipping agencies were captured at sea as 'prize', three neutral ships carrying contraband were intercepted and taken to Indian ports where they were detained and 20 other neutral ships, which were either intercepted at sea or detained in Indian harbours on the commencement of hostilities, were released after offloading the contraband found on board(78).

All in all, no same-sized navy in the world could have achieved more.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Ibid.
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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Krishnan, p.28.
14. From Official Records.
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16. Krishnan, pp.30-43.
17. Ibid., p.38.
18. Ibid., pp.30-43.
19. Ibid.
20. From Official Records.
21. Ibid.
22. Krishnan, p.41.
23. Khan, F.M., p.232.
24. From Official Records.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Krishnan, p.44.
30. From Official Records.
31. Ibid.
32. Krishnan, p.62.
33. Ibid., pp.62-63.
34. From Official Records.
35. Krishnan, p.57.
36. Kissinger, p.905.
37. Gupta, pp.112-114.
38. RK 623 ceased to exist. The US Seventh Fleet withdrew soon after.
39. It has not proved possible to determine whether it was an Indian Navy operation supported by the MB, or a Mukti Bahini operation supported by the IN. The evidence appears conflicting, and the question is really of academic interest only.
40. From Official Records.
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