

Fifty Years after India's First Airborne Operation at Poongli Bridge, Tangail: What we know of its Planning?

(Part 2)

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to try and uncover what we know about the planning process of the airborne operation at Poongli Bridge, along with its execution, to achieve the desired objectives. This was the first classic parachute operation mounted by the Indian Army since independence and in its success we need to know what went into its making: with the starting step being the planning stage. This article first looks at the different accounts of the 1971 War by various authors, specifically relating to the chosen area of interest, including as many as possible key participants and other critical observers and researchers. Based on these, one could apply logical analysis and counterfactual arguments to identify the most likely scenario(s) to arrive at what may have been the case. Once we have some idea of the key planning factors and evolution sequence, we could also briefly correlate our understanding with the initial execution of the plans as they were put into motion. This preliminary study will, hopefully, lay the foundation for a more informed debate on certain highlights and issues that this article will bring up. This is the concluding part of the article wherein, Part 1 was published in the previous (April - June 2023) issue of the USI Journal.

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Major General HS Kler, the then Brigade Commander 95 Mountain Brigade

Major General Hardev S Kler writes that while making his plans to achieve the tasks set for him by the General Officer Commanding 101 Communication Zone Area (GOC 101 CZA), he eventually conceived a plan that furthered the overall objectives, which included the plan to drop the airborne Battalion (Bn) Group at Tangail.¹ Kler, then a Brigadier commanding 95 Mountain Brigade (Mtn Bde), placed under 101 CZA, says that he first brought up his ideas broadly encompassing the plan on 04 Nov, when the Army Commander, Lieutenant General JS Aurora, visited his brigade (p 66). He writes his initial realisation of this idea after his brigade was tasked with the capture of Mymensingh and they had moved to Tura by the end of Oct and begun the planning process in his own words, "A scrutiny of the lay of the land struck me that our planners had completely missed out the tactical and strategic role of the land approach to Dacca. Another plan, which initially seemed far-fetched, then started taking shape in my mind. In broad terms, this involved an advance from Kamalpur to Bakshiganj, crossing the River Brahmaputra west of Jamalpur, establishing a roadblock on the road Jamalpur-Tangail, ask for a parachute drop at Tangail to cut off the withdrawal of enemy troops and then dash for Dacca". (P. 65-66) (See Figure 3 for operations of 101 CZA).

This plan, he writes, found approval of the two Generals in the audience (the Army Commander and the GOC 101 CZA) who were "Suitably impressed and agreed with me".² This was followed up with a sand model on 12 Nov, where it was seemingly validated for execution, as per Kler (p. 21).³ In fact, Kler's 95 Mtn Bde executed its operations more or less in line with the broad outline he lists out as discussed at this sand model discussion (p. 21).

Brigadier (then Captain) PK Ghosh, Officer sent for Advance Intelligence Collection into Bangladesh

Captain PK Ghosh was despatched on a behind-the-enemy-lines mission to secure information that would help finalise the selection of the Drop Zone (DZ) and aid in the execution of the paratroop operation with the help of local Mukti Bahini cadres under Tiger Siddiqui, a Mukti Bahini commander operating in the general area identified.

The final DZ selection may have been based on the inputs sent back by Captain PK Ghosh, who had infiltrated into Bangladesh on the nights of 01/02 Dec to secure actionable intelligence besides other supporting tasks with the help of Tiger Siddiqui who was operating in the area. This is mentioned in accounts by Ghosh and Nuran Nabi, a member of Tangail Mukti Bahini.⁴ This seemingly was the only such mission mounted, which is also mentioned by Lieutenant General Thomas in his account, who writes about telling Captain Ghosh not to inform anyone, even his own family, about the mission he was being sent on. Captain Ghosh, however, was not told the date and location of the drop for security reasons.⁵

Additional Observer Accounts

As regards the role of GOC 101 CZA, Major General GS Gill, we did not come across any account by General Gill himself, but there is a mention about his involvement in employment of the airborne operation in the account by Major General Lachhman Singh, who has authored 'Victory in Bangladesh'.⁶ He writes that, "At Gill's insistence, his task was enlarged to include the capture of Tangail" and "[A] paradrop was also planned to secure the bridge on the Lohaganj river north of Tangail and cut the retreat of the withdrawing Pakistanis" (p. 150). Lachhman Singh adds that in view of Major General GS Gill's plans "To press on to Tangail to get behind the enemy forces at Mymensingh and destroy them piecemeal. [Lieutenant General] Aurora agreed to strengthen Gill and improve his chances of destroying the enemy at Tangail by interposing a parachute drop of a battalion in support of Gill's operations" (p.151). Lachhman Singh, however, does not state specifically 'when and where' this meeting or exchange took place, but clearly it seems to be during the planning process when Gill is arguing for expansion of the initial tasks allocated to him, i.e., from "To reach the river and capture Jamalpur and Mymensingh" to include "The capture of Tangail" and, finally, to also include "Contact Dacca by D plus 12/13" (p. 150). It is to be noted that a similar request is claimed to have been made by Brigadier Kler while making his case with the Army Commander, in presence of the GOC 101 CZA, at the sand model referred to above. So, it is possible that this may be a reference to those revised plans.

Commanding Officer (CO), 2 Para, Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) KS Pannu, writing about 2 Para's operation at

Tangail in 'The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops'⁷, does not mention anything about the operational planning process and how the plan itself emerged. His account focuses more on the on-ground execution of the task by 2 Para Bn Group and its subsequent triumphant entry into Dacca.

While going over some of the accounts covering Air Force participation in the Eastern Command sector, one finds that most do not go into the planning towards selection of the para drop zone, as is to be expected⁸, though, there is a mention of the various alternatives considered in the record of air operations in the east by Jagan Mohan and Chopra.⁹ They write that "Director of Military Operations (DMO) identified likely operations: Capturing Kurmitola airfield; Subsequent strengthening of force to capture Dacca; Capturing Hardinge bridge; D-day (commencement of hostilities) + 5: paradrop at Tangail to block retreating forces [...]; Capture bridge near Jhenida-Magura road to assist 4 Mountain Division (the Division's rapid pace of progress made this mission unnecessary); Para battalion drop to capture Kamarkali ferry on Madhumati River; D+10: Para company drop to capture targets of opportunity in II Corps area; Only after D+15: Para Bn to capture Kurmitola; to be reinforced by the brigade drop to assist the fall of Dacca". (pp. 291-292). From what we know already, it is quite likely that these may have been the tentative tasks identified early on, in the initial planning stage because the authors go on to add that, "These tasks were confirmed by Advance Headquarter (AHQ), Eastern Air Command with directives issued for planning drop zones, mounting airfields and aircraft allocation" (p. 292).

What we know about the planned second 'Battalion less Two Company Group' Airborne Drop (later called-off)

We do not hear much about this second smaller airborne operation that was being planned alongside the 2 Para Bn Group drop as it was eventually not executed. Major General Afsir Karim, then CO of 8 Para, that was earmarked for this task, writes in 'The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops'¹⁰ that it was decided to "Drop 2 Para Group at Tangail to interdict enemy forces withdrawing to Dacca from the north and to drop a two company group task force of 8 Para at Jhenida to cut off enemy's withdrawal towards the Madhumati River" (p. 186). However, "Jhenida drop ... was cancelled at the last moment as the enemy abandoned this sector

prematurely in order to get across the Madhumati River. 4 Infantry Division, therefore, had little problem in capturing Jhenida 48 hours ahead of the timetable" (p. 187). The two company group task force of 8 Para then rejoined the Para Brigade, less 2 Para Bn Group that was operating in a ground role in the same sector. Not much is known about existence of any alternative plans for this force and reasons why one of those was not followed up at this stage are not known. On the early morning of 08 Dec, 8 Para two company group task force had been released and was in the process of joining the brigade.¹¹ Operations in all four sectors of Eastern Command to achieve their objectives in East Pakistan were still underway and these troops possibly could have been effectively employed somewhere to expedite the ongoing operations, but there seems to be no planning for such a contingency.

Likely Planning Scenario(s) and Emergence of the Airborne Operation

The above accounts give us an idea of how the planning of the airborne operation proceeded though individual accounts are sometimes at variance with one another. There are some overlaps, and even inconsistencies, that can be spotted across some of these accounts, which is possible in a complex scenario as this, especially when ideas are being floated and discussed at multiple levels and the paper trail is not strong. It is not within the scope of this article to comment on the veracity of all these above accounts emanate from their individual perspectives that see only a partial picture, putting themselves at the centre of things, so to say. Also, it is naturally to be expected, in the post-hoc context, that the author or ownership for the airborne operation's plans would have many claimants, bringing to mind the adage; 'Victory has many fathers and defeat is an orphan'. It is, though, likely that various formation commanders would have bid for the Para Bn (or Bn less) Group airborne operation to support their respective formation's operations, since they knew of its availability and the area of Tangail and near-about seemed a feasible, no-risk kind of a scenario. Let's review some of the other likely inferences from the above review.

Planning Timeline and Process. What emerges from the above accounts is that as HQ Eastern Command's plans began to take some shape, it was engaged with the airborne element that was

made available to it and various options were considered at different levels in a consultative manner. While detailed appreciation for specific operational employment most likely took place at the command level, Major General IS Gill was on hand to give his advice on the options being considered, as well as active encouragement for the feasible options. It is not clear from a review of materials discussed above, if bids for available airborne resources were called for from the formations engaged in this theatre. Evidently, this may have been constrained by the time of issue of the Operational Instructions from the Army HQ and then by the Eastern Command¹², though broad planning and scenario war-gaming would certainly have been going on simultaneously. It is not very clear why 4 Corps, which was to operate in an area very densely intersected by riverine terrain, did not visualise any opportunity for airborne forces' employment to further their operations, with Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, the Corps Commander, having commanded the 50 (I) Para Brigade earlier. Though, he was in the process of securing 110 Helicopter Unit's Mi-4s for his Corps, he was initially asked to plan for at most a company heli-borne effort.¹³ One wonders if it was the operating limitations put on these airborne forces' employment (some of these brought up earlier) that limited flexibility with a commander which was a detriment to strong bids by Sagat Singh. This was coupled with the fact that till late in Nov, and even thereafter, there was lack of clarity on whether his Corps' objective visualised crossing of the Meghna and a move towards Dacca to begin with. If so, this calls for a need for review of future planning processes so that commanders in field are not stymied by these limitations and lack of flexibility noted above. Perhaps, some of the structural reasons for those have been overcome already, or may be not.

It appears that as the operational plans were being finalised, most likely, by mid-Oct or early Nov, a broad consensus on the employment of the Para Bn Group would likely have emerged and resources approved and committed. At this stage, Tangail, not Kurmitola, was narrowed down to as an objective. The specific drop-zone from amongst a few available choices around this objective would have been chosen further closer to the date, based on air-photos and aided by reconnaissance reports sent back by Captain Ghosh, as mentioned above.

Key Constraints Limiting the Scope. We see that an effort was made to broaden the scope of the employment of the airborne element to maximise their utility; however, a governing limitation was that of the air resources the air force could provide for support to the army in this context. The resource availability against expected time horizon is given in Lieutenant General Thomas's account, as seen above. This seems to have restricted the scope of employment of the airborne force in support of the ground operations in the Eastern Command area of operations. A point to note is that despite this being an ideal operational scenario, where the Air Force had gained complete air-superiority over the battleground in the Eastern Sector by D plus 3¹⁴, it was still limited by overall resource constraints to make available sufficient resources to enhance the operational employment of the airborne force against other competing demands. This factor alone may be more critical in any future conflict and innovative work-arounds will need to be considered and developed.

Planning Process. Top-down or Bottom-up. Army HQs instructions to the Eastern Command, in mid-August, were followed up by Eastern Command's instructions to the three Corps and 101 CZA soon after. In the intervening period since the early warning sometime in April, broad planning had begun over maps and sand-models. As the plans would have crystallised over these brainstorming sessions, formation commanders would likely have bid for additional resources to achieve their objectives more efficiently and in a timely manner. Records of such bids, if made, for any vertical-lift force employment, e.g., airborne or heliborne, are conspicuous by their absence, in general, in most battle accounts, starting with the official history and Lieutenant General Jacob's account of the Eastern Command's planning. One finds such references only in the accounts of or about commanders from 101 CZA, that have been recounted above. These commanders were, however, already very much in the airborne operation planning loop, as it were. Hence, this could be a result of what could be termed here as 'critical occurrence bias': which can be explained as the tendency in people to bring up or recall facts and events (or even conjure these up) associating themselves closely with critical incidents in the post-hoc scenario, rather than bring up or refer to missing data or events.¹⁵

Curiously, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, the erstwhile 50 (I) Para Bde Commander, who led it in the 1961 liberation of Goa, comes across as somewhat reticent in the manner of bold bids for these resources. Is this possibly due to the restrictions placed by the Eastern Command on the 4 Corps' objectives initially, aggravated by the uncertainty of flexibility in availability of these resources on call as per the evolving operational situation when battle would be joined?¹⁶ If so, then this limit and restriction upon assured availability of critical operational air resources to further ground operations is a serious issue, especially when considered here against the air force's plans and its confidence about ensuring complete air superiority within the initial days of the war once it broke out.

Objectives Considered: Strategic or Tactical. The focus of the airborne forces' employment appears to be oriented to the operations of 4 Corps and 101 CZA, in view of the expectation of these thrusts as being most likely to get to Dacca quickest. However, there does not appear to be any serious bid for these forces from 4 Corps and by design or default, the area considered for the Bn Group airborne operation remained in the Tangail-Kurmitola airfield region. With Kurmitola being ruled out during Eastern Command's planning, Tangail, and the area around, seems to have been the sole contender for this operation. Looked at objectively, while capture of Kurmitola provided the possibility of unhinging the defence of Dacca and bringing the war in the east to an expeditious end, there was an element of risk involved as noted above. In contrast, the drop at Tangail, at least as initially planned¹⁷, was more of a tactical enhancement of the thrust by 101 CZA, in view of its planned operational timeline (see below), which cut down relatively on the element of boldness and surprise. The level and manner of employment of such critical resources need deliberate thought to maximise their effect.

Integration of the Airborne Operation with 101 CZA's Plans. Thomas brings out that the earliest this Airborne Bn Group could be launched was on D plus 7 and that seems to have been treated as a hard constraint.¹⁸ To what extent it was concurrently dove-tailed with 101 CZA's operations is difficult to state. Though 95 Mtn Bde's Kler writes¹⁹ that on 08 Dec, as his brigade was surrounding the 31 Baluch Regiment entrenched strongly at Jamalpur, he assured the Eastern Army Commander, Lieutenant

General Aurora, that he would stick to the operation's D-day schedule and requested him to "Allow the para drop to proceed as planned on 11 Dec" (p. 90). Kler eventually was planning the attack on Jamalpur on night 10/11, however, luckily that action was not needed as 31 Baluch attempted to break out of Jamalpur the same night — a move that was 'sensed' by Kler (as he writes) in time and the brigade's attack plans changed to ambush 31 Baluch on the road south to Tangail (p. 91-93). It looks like that there was an element of luck, chance or boldness, whatever you call it, as plans for the link-up would likely have been affected if 31 Baluch had continued to resist at Jamalpur, which they seemingly were capable of.²⁰

However, this does raise a couple of pertinent questions. If 95 Mtn Bde's operations had proceeded smoothly as per their initial plans (which would have been their normal expectation in view of the lead preparatory time), would the airborne drop have been too late to be of any substantive practical use? Eventually, in the scenario that finally evolved as described here, was there any flexibility to advance the airborne drop so as to more effectively interfere with the enemy withdrawing towards Tangail and on to Dacca or to put pressure on the entrenched enemy forces from the rear or even, more boldly, unhinge their positions in a classic coup-de-main coordinated move?

Responses during Dynamically-paced Operations limited to Pre-planned Contingencies. One aspect of the planning and execution that stands out starkly is that when the operational dynamics took over, further deliberations of operational plans and employment of resources were seen to be very much limited by the contingencies earlier discussed, and planned for, in the preparatory period. Especially, as we see in context of airborne operation planning during this war, due to various constraints and limited flexibility, commanders were not able to fine-tune force employment more effectively as the war progressed, e.g., the bn less two company group airborne element, was not employed and the bn group airborne drop employed just as initially planned. In fact, 'behavioural decision theory', a field that has developed over the last 60-70 years, tells us that our brain system can only take a limited amount of uncertainty during stress and that it falls to previously learned responses during such crises.²¹ The clear learning for tomorrow's leaders from this is that if they do go

beyond the envelope of conventional thinking during peace time training, they will never be able to come up with creative, timely responses to crises situations that often demand newer, as against standard but expected, responses²²; they will, instead, fall back to their learned, albeit, tried and tested routines that may not be adequate under the emerging circumstances.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, while this article may be beset by limitations in terms of availability of truthful, factual and more number of in-depth accounts of this operation's planning process that could throw better light on the issues it delves into, existing information and accounts throw up interesting points to ponder. The article uses these as points of departure to make some tentative arguments based on what we know and it seeks to initiate a debate into this critical aspect of planning and employment of potentially unhinging forces in the current and emerging battlefield environments. In a future scenario, these resources needn't be restricted to airborne forces alone and, in fact, could be in conjunction with other specialised and field forces working jointly to introduce newer dimensions of combat potential. The planning and execution of these operations, however, as seen here, would be limited by human minds that may need to open up to their limitations and work to extend those. The review also shows us how the reluctance of operational commanders, and other participants, to record their experiences and the thinking process in a more forthright and truthful manner can lead to deficiencies and gaps in the analysis of various operational actions in the future, thus, limiting the learning potential for the future generations.

By analysing this operation as a case to trigger further debate on some relevant issues, we look forward to contrary and contrasting viewpoints and analyses which would help throw further light on some of these critical aspects we have raised above, that we all need to debate and learn from. Any such analysis or viewpoint should be truthful and based on the prevailing situation and information available then; not on post-hoc outcomes and information that we know now.

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What we know of its Planning?

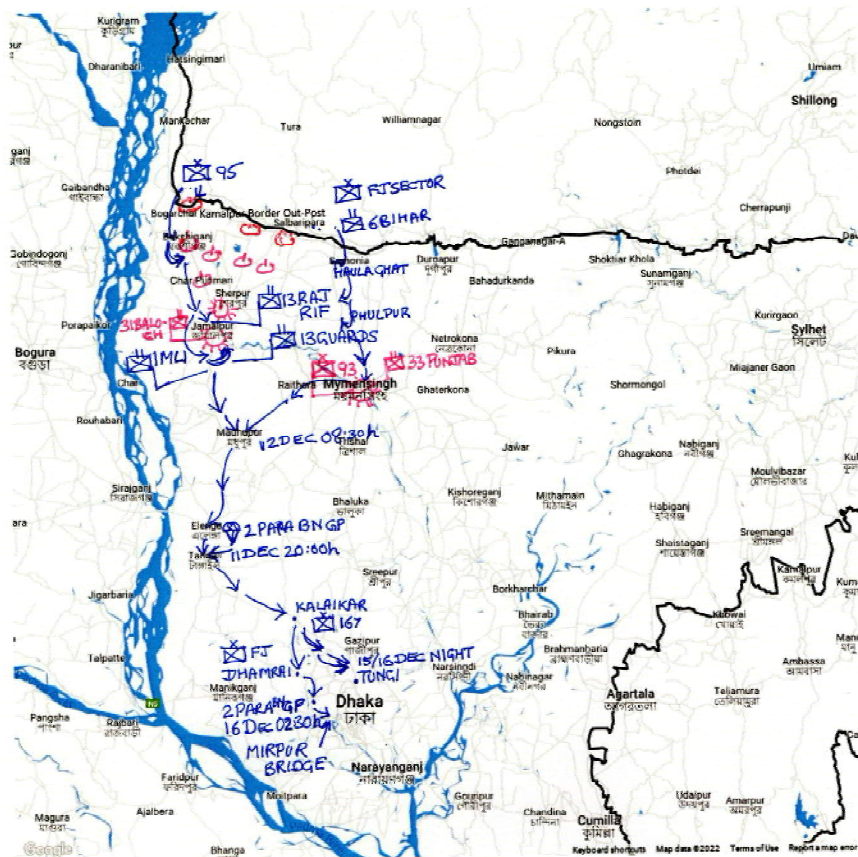


Figure 3 : Operations of 101 Communication Zone Area
(Sketch overlaid on contemporary Google map of the general area)

Endnotes:

¹ Maj. Gen. Hardev S Kler, Making of a plan: The capture of Dhaka, in Maj. Gen. DC Katoch and Lt. Col. Q S A Zahir's (Eds.), Liberation: Bangladesh—1971, Bloomsbury, New Delhi, pp. 65-67.

² Major General HS Kler, 12 Days to Dacca, Quest Publishers, 2015/2017, p. 20.

³ This claim does run contrary to Jacob's accounts and this aspect has been brought up by Kler (ibid.), who substantiates his side with specific names and details of the audience present at the sand model.

⁴ Brig. P K Ghosh, *Behind Enemy Lines*, Section 3(4), pp. 161-170 and Nuran Nabi, *The Tangail Landings*, Section 3(3), pp.150-160 in Maj. Gen. D C Katoch and Lt. Col. Q S A Zahir's (Eds.) *Liberation: Bangladesh—1971*, op. cit.

⁵ Ghosh, pp. 167-168 and Thomas, p. 21.

⁶ Maj. Gen. Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, Natraj Publishers, Dehradun, Reprinted 2005.

⁷ Maj. Gen. K S Pannu, *Operation Cactus Lily: 1971*, pp. 193-201, in Maj. Gen. Afsir Karim's (Editor) *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops*, Lancer Publishers, 1993.

⁸ For example, Air Vice Marshal A K Tiwary in *1971 Air War: Battle for Air Supremacy*, Book Excerpt "Indian Air Force in Wars, Lancer Publishers, 2013", in *Indian Defence Review*, 15 November 2017, accessed on 1 May 2022 at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/1971-air-war-battle-for-air-supremacy/0/>, wherein he writes, "Well before the war began, contingency planning for a battalion paradrop at four places had already been effected — Tangail being the 'priority one' drop."

⁹ P V S Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *Eagles over Bangladesh: The India Air Force in the 1971 Liberation War*, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2013.

¹⁰ Maj. Gen. Afsir Karim, Chapter 6: *Operations in East Pakistan (Bangladesh): 1971*, pp. 184-192, in Maj. Gen. Afsir Karim (Editor), *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops*, Lancer Publishers, 1993.

¹¹ Karim, p. 189.

¹² Operation Instructions by the Army HQ were issued on 16 August (Jacob, 1997/2018, p. 74) and soon thereafter issued by the Eastern Command too. Randhir Singh gives more details of the planning process, the to and fro and all that, right from end May, by when Jacob "had already prepared an outline framework", in, Maj. Gen. Randhir Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh*, Vij Books, 2013/2015 reprint (p. 116; pp. 115-120).

¹³ Randhir Singh mentions that Sagat was "mandated to utilise only one company for heliborne operations ... required to make detailed plans and submit them well in advance ... (but he) gave a non committal reply and submitted no plans" (Singh, *ibid*, p. 131). There is some ambiguity about when helicopter resources were made available to 4 Corps, since Randhir Singh mentions that these came under their command only on 6/7 December (p. 193-194), but Jacob (1997/2018) mentions that for 4 Corps to also pose a threat to Dacca, "they were allotted the complete Mi4 helicopter resources, i.e., fourteen helicopters. These were sent to them

prior to operations for training.” (p. 74) This, however, is also not supported by Sqn Ldr Pushp Vaid in his account, Special Heliborne Operations (SHBOs) by Mi-4s in the 1971 Liberation War, in Sqn Ldr RTS Chhina (Ed.), *Battle Tales: Soldiers' Recollections of the 1971 War*, 2022, pp. 87-116. Vaid was the Flight Commander of 110 HU and actively involved in planning and conduct of these heliborne operations from 7 December onwards.

¹⁴ Prasad et al., op. cit., p. 598-599, 615-616.

¹⁵ This is a slight off-take on the work of Kahneman and Tversky and other psychologists on heuristics and biases, namely, the more well-known “hindsight” and “self-serving” biases. From the examples discussed above, these commanders at least appear to give themselves sole or more credit for the planning and execution of this airborne operation, especially as it turned out to be successful, critical and (possibly) easy to execute.

¹⁶ This is mentioned in various accounts, including, Sukhwant Singh, Lachhman Singh and Randhir Singh, *ibid*.

¹⁷ This is an important point to consider and must not be mixed up with the turn of events subsequently on ground after 14 December, when 2 Para Bn Group happened to be in the right place at the right time and provided the GOC 101 CZA with enhanced capability by resuming advance on a newly discovered axis that struck straight at the heart of Dacca at the Mirpur bridge. This is well covered in any of the accounts earlier above, e.g., Prasad, Praval, etc.

¹⁸ Thomas, 2022, op. cit.

¹⁹ Maj. Gen. Hardev S Kler, *The Battle of Jamalpur*, in Maj. Gen. DC Katoch and Lt. Col. Q S A Zahir's (Eds.), *Liberation: Bangladesh—1971*, Bloomsbury, New Delhi, pp. 88-94.

²⁰ Salik, op cit, p. 187-189.

²¹ There is a long history of behavioural decision research that brings out the limits of the functioning of human minds in general and especially during stressful conditions. This encompasses the work of researchers such as Simon, Kahneman, Tversky, Bazerman and Thaler amongst others. Of these, Simon, Kahneman and Thaler have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for their contributions to the emergence of this field.

²² There is a bit of a play of words here, in that, crises situations are exactly so because they have not been thought of yet and hence require creative and situationally-appropriate responses by leaders.