

Visit to Bangladesh by Veterans of the 1st Battalion the Maratha Light Infantry

(Jangi Paltan) (12 to 16 April 2014)

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd)@

The Origin of the Idea

The idea of such a visit has its origins in a brief exchange between Lieutenant Generals Satish Nambiar (Y Company Commander during the 1971 War) and YM Bammi (GSO-2 in 101 Communication Zone Area) when the latter (who was nominated for travel to Bangladesh as part of the yearly Adjutant General's Branch sponsored visit in mid-December 2013) wished to obtain some photographs of the Jangi Paltan's actions. He was referred to Lieutenant Colonel KS Puntambekar (C Company Commander during the War). This reference by YM Bammi, and the fact that he was able to establish contact with Zohal Haq Munshi (the freedom fighter who, together with many others, was with the Paltan from prior to the War right through to the entry into Dhaka on the afternoon of 16th December 1971), spurred Keshav Puntambekar into action in his own inimitable style. In mid-January 2014, he got in touch with Lieutenant General KS Brar (who was the Commanding Officer of the Jangi Paltan during the war) and a number of other colleagues suggesting that we travel together as a group to Bangladesh to revisit the sites where the Jangi Paltan fought memorable battle actions during the War of Liberation in 1971.

Germination

Whereas "Bulbul" Brar, while wholeheartedly endorsing the idea, expressed his inability to form part of the group due to the severe security restrictions he was bound by, the suggestion found total acceptance, endorsement and support, from all the others that included Colonel Shashi Pawar (who was A Company Commander during the war), Lieutenant Colonel Mahesh Sachdev (who was D Company Commander), Colonel Subhash Kulkarni (who was the Adjutant), Lieutenant Colonel Sridhar Salgar, Brigadier BK Ponwar, and Lieutenant Colonel Jaiwant Pimpley; and in due course, Lieutenant Colonel Sushil Sarin, Lieutenant Colonel VM Sawant, Captain TKV Nair (the Quartermaster of the Paltan), and Colonel AK Rajpal (AEC officer on attachment with the Paltan). Initial indications were that at least four or five wives would accompany.

In putting together the visit, our thoughts went out to four officers of the Paltan who had taken part in the operations but were no longer amongst us; namely, Colonel Shahaji Mohite (who was then the second-in-command), Captain Rajendra Dafle (Y Company officer who was awarded the Vir Chakra), Colonel Suresh Patil, and Lieutenant Colonel RM Mohan. Harsh Malhotra, the Regimental Medical Officer could not be contacted.

Taking Shape

Satish Nambiar took on the responsibility of getting in touch with our Defence Adviser in Dhaka for assistance in setting up a programme of visit, reasonably priced accommodation and transport at as reasonable rates as possible; as also for liaison with the Bangladesh Defence Adviser in New Delhi for issue of visas to all those travelling. As it happened, our Defence Adviser in Dhaka Brigadier PC Thimmaya, was from the 5th Battalion the Mechanised Infantry Regiment, of which Regiment Satish Nambiar was the Colonel after General K Sundarji. He called on Brigadier General Noor Mohammad Noor Islam, the Bangladesh Defence Adviser in New Delhi and provided him with the details of the officers and spouses who intended to travel to Bangladesh on this memorable visit; Brigadier General Noor passed on the word to the various consulates for action. Preparations for the visit in terms of visa applications and air ticketing were set in motion by individual officers from their respective places of stay.

Fruition

By mid-March 2014, the numbers had started dwindling due to medical and domestic compulsions. Shashi Pawar, Sridhar Salgar, Jaiwant Pimpley, and Vasant Sawant dropped out for medical reasons, and Sushil Sarin and AK Rajpal expressed their inability to make the trip. The final line-up therefore was: Satish and Indira Nambiar; Keshav Puntambekar; Mahesh and Bina Sachdev; Subhash Kulkarni; and Basant Ponwar. Due to compelling domestic commitments, Bina Sachdev had to drop out at the very last moment.

The aspect of taking appropriate mementoes for presentation was addressed. Keshav Puntambekar got in touch with the Deputy Commandant at the Maratha Light Infantry Regimental Centre (MLIRC) and ascertained that some pieces of 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on Horseback' were available. After discussion with Satish Nambiar and firming up on the wording to be inscribed on the plaque mounted on the plinth, the MLIRC was requested to make five pieces available and despatched to Pune to Subhash Kulkarni. The inscription decided upon was as under :

"Presented by

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, Lieutenant Colonel KS Puntambekar, Lieutenant Colonel MC Sachdev, Colonel SA Kulkarni, and Brigadier BK Ponwar, war veterans of the 1st Battalion the Maratha Light Infantry (Jangi Paltan) to recall with great pride our participation in the 1971 War of Liberation

April 2014"

Telephonic contact was finally established with Colonel Harish Sharma, the Commanding Officer of the Jangi Paltan. While it was too late to initiate action to get one of the serving young officers to accompany the group on its visit, so that succeeding generations could get a flavour of the Paltan's performance during the 1971 War, the Commanding Officer lent his support by despatching five Jangi Paltan plaques, as also some ties and scarves for presentation as mementoes.

In the meanwhile, thanks to the efforts of Brigadier Thimmaya, a super programme of the visit was finalised after much coordination with the Bangladesh authorities, and appropriate reception, accommodation and transport arrangements were put in place.

Saturday 12 April 2014: Dhaka

The first to arrive at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka, were Satish and Indira Nambiar by Air India flight from New Delhi at 0900 hours on Saturday 12 April 2014. They were received by Brigadier Thimmaya and the Conducting Officer, Major Mohsin from the “Welfare Department” of the Headquarters. A commando, trained in VIP protection, Major Mohsin was with the group throughout the stay and became a member of the “Jangi Paltan” team; a person the members of the visiting team will always remember. We later met his wife and became aware that she too was a Major in the Bangladesh Army, and also trained in VIP protection duties. Within half an hour, Basant Ponwar who flew in from Kolkata arrived in the VIP lounge. On completion of formalities that were most efficiently taken care of by Brigadier Thimmaya’s staff, the three were taken to the place of stay of the Jangi Paltan delegation, the “Mahananda” VIP complex close to the Bangladesh Army Headquarters. A most generous gesture by the Bangladesh Army, no doubt due to the excellent rapport established by Brigadier Thimmaya.

Shortly after noon, Keshav Puntambekar, Mahesh Sachdev and Subhash Kulkarni arrived from Mumbai and a reunion soon took place at “Mahananda” followed by non-stop reminiscences and lunch.

After some rest and change, the veterans set out for the first item on their visit programme. The transportation provided by the Bangladesh Army was an air conditioned minibus that was to be with the group throughout the visit. The driver was excellent, in as much as, only he could have negotiated the traffic in the manner he did. There was also a spare driver, not even sparingly used. The two were supported by a military policeman. It is quite possible that the reputation of the Jangi Paltan had preceded us and the authorities felt it necessary to provide military police back-up in case any of us got into trouble. In the event, every member of the group was on the best behaviour throughout.

The first port of call was the Liberation War Museum, set-up in 1996 and run by a private trust to honour the heroic struggle of the people of Bangladesh for freedom. The museum collection has about 16000 objects that include rare photographs, documents, media coverage and material used by freedom fighters and martyrs. Many of the items on display pay tribute to, and acknowledge the contribution of, the people of India and the Indian Armed Forces. On arrival at the Museum the group was thrilled to meet our “freedom fighter” colleague, Zohal Haq Munshi. Much emotional embracing and hand-shaking ensued. It was indeed a great reunion of sorts, as Munshi had always retained a special place in the hearts and minds of the Jangi Paltan veterans. Besides all his other activities with the Paltan, he had placed his life on the line on 09 December 1971 by agreeing to carry the “famous” hand-written message from Brigadier HS Kler, the then Commander 95 Mountain Brigade, asking the Commander of the Jamalpur garrison and Commanding Officer 31 Baluch, Lieutenant Colonel Sultan Ahmad, to surrender as the position had been outflanked with the Jangi Paltan interposed between the Jamalpur garrison and the route to Tangail, and plenty of air support on call. Though initially beaten up somewhat by the Pakistani troops at Jamalpur, Munshi returned with an audacious reply from Sultan Ahmad, with a live bullet enclosed in the envelope. Munshi had made the trip to Jamalpur and back on a bicycle commandeered from Mollapara. The Jangi Paltan veterans were unanimous in congratulating Munshi for being conferred with the “Bir Purush” award by the Government of Bangladesh for his contributions to the war effort.

Satish and Indira Nambiar accompanied by the Defence Adviser had to detach themselves from the group to call on the High Commissioner, Pankaj Saran. Satish had known the High Commissioner earlier when the latter was with the National Security Council Secretariat, and later in the Prime Minister’s Office. The High Commissioner was impressed with the spirit of the Jangi Paltan that prompted the veterans to undertake this private visit to the 1971 battle sites. He expressed his inability to host them as he was leaving that night for Vietnam where his wife was the Ambassador. He however conveyed his best wishes for a successful visit.

The first evening was rounded off with a marvellous dinner at the residence of Major Ashok Nath and his Swedish wife Ylva. Ashok Nath had served as a short service officer in the Indian Army (Armoured Corps) in the late 1970s; he left after doing five years or so, and went off to Sweden to pursue academic work. Satish had got to know him as Director, United Service Institution of India in context of Ashok’s work on Indian Army history, and had visited the couple in Stockholm. As it happened, Ashok was at a dinner hosted by Satish at his NOIDA residence on 05 March 2014 for Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, among others, on the occasion of a conference in Delhi to commemorate India’s contribution to the First World War (1914-18), where he became aware of the visit by Jangi Paltan veterans. Ashok’s reply to the letter of thanks sent on return from Dhaka, expresses the flavour of that evening: “The excellent spirit exuberated that evening goes to show what a terrific esprit de corps Jangi Paltan has; no wonder 31 Baluch were no match for you all. I think Ylva also got some idea of what regimental spirit is all about.”

Sunday 13 April 2014: Dhaka

After a leisurely breakfast at “Mahananda”, appropriately attired in Jangi Paltan ties, the veterans set out to pay homage to the fallen heroes of the Liberation War at the “Shikha Anirban”, a Bangladesh Armed Forces memorial somewhat akin to the one at India Gate in New Delhi. A visit to the Jatiyo Smriti Soudha (National Martyrs Memorial) at Sawar could not apparently be arranged due to time and space constraints. Even so, it may be a matter of some satisfaction that Satish Nambiar had visited that memorial in the second week of August 2001 when invited for a conference on South Asian security in Bangladesh; he had, on that occasion, recorded an entry in the visitor’s book recalling the Jangi Paltan’s participation in the 1971 War of Liberation.

The veterans then proceeded to Army Headquarters to make a formal call on the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Md Mainul Islam (the Chief of the Army Staff was apparently away on a visit). Lieutenant General Islam accorded a warm welcome to the group, recalling with great fervour the contribution of the Indian people and the Indian Armed Forces, including the Jangi Paltan, to the Liberation War in 1971. After exchange of pleasantries over tea

and refreshments, and presentation of mementoes, a group photograph was taken outside the office. The veterans took leave of the CGS with profuse expression of gratitude for the excellent arrangements that had been made by the Bangladesh Army for the visit.

On the way back to the “Mahananda”, the group made a brief visit to the “Bijoy Kheton”, a Bangladesh Armed Forces museum that was set-up a few years back. This was followed by a lively inter-action at “Mahananda” with two Bangladeshi veterans of the 1971 Liberation War, Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, a recipient of the Swadhinata Padak and Bir Protik, and Major Qamrul Hassan Bhuiyan (Retd). Both are regular visitors to India in their active pursuit of recording the history of the freedom struggle. Jangi Paltan mementoes were presented to both veterans as a reminder of the inter-action.

After a quiet lunch, the group set out in the minibus for a meeting with Mr AKM Mozammel Huq, the Minister for Liberation War Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. A trip that all members of the group will remember for “forgettable’ reasons. A trip that should have taken about half an hour was, because of the apparently perennial Dhaka traffic jams, extended to about an hour and a half resulting in the veterans’ arrival at the Minister’s office almost an hour late; unforgivable by Jangi Paltan standards. The Minister was however generous in receiving the group without delay, and welcomed the veterans with great warmth and affection; recalling with some nostalgia his own commitment to the freedom struggle, and acknowledging with gratitude the support and assistance of the people of India and the Indian Armed Forces. Following an exchange of views and tea and snacks, the Minister was presented with the “Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on Horseback” memento.

The group then returned to “Mahananda” to quickly freshen up before leaving at about 1800 hours for Ghatail Cantt, where HQ 19 Infantry Division was based, and where the group was to spend two nights (13/14 and 14/15 April 2014) while visiting the battle sites. The Defence Adviser, Brigadier PC Thimmaya and the conducting officer Major Mohsin, also travelled with the group. The long drive of about five hours with one short halt, was enlivened by exchange of episodes of the days with the Jangi Paltan, including those of the war period. On arrival at Ghatail Cantt, the Colonel Staff of the Division together with other officers, including two conducting officers (one male and one female) escorted the veterans to the comfortable guest rooms that had been arranged in the medical unit of the Division. A very late dinner was followed by well deserved rest for the night.

Monday, 14 April 2014: Kamalpur/Bakshiganj/Jamalpur/Ghatail Cantt

At 0800 hours Monday, 14 April 2014, the group set out again in the minibus via Jamalpur and Bakshiganj, arriving at Kamalpur post on the border with Meghalaya, at about 1030 hours to be received by Lieutenant Colonel Tarique, the Commanding Officer of 35 BGB Battalion. Assembled at the post were a large number of freedom fighters from the area; the Jangi Paltan veterans were obviously pleased to see that Munshi was also present. Lieutenant Colonel Tarique made a brief presentation about the Liberation War effort in the area, including the actions fought by the Indian Army. In reply, the “Baby” of the group, Basant Ponwar (who was just 22 years old during the 1971 War) addressed the gathering. Basant did the Jangi Paltan proud by making an absolutely inspirational address that brought tears to the eyes of the assembled freedom fighters.

The veterans then proceeded to lay wreaths at a memorial that had been constructed at the post, and also visited another memorial in the village to pay homage to the martyrs who were commemorated there. This was followed by a sumptuous lunch and presentation of mementoes. ‘Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on Horseback’ memento will hopefully adorn the Officers Mess of 35 BGB or the office of the Commanding Officer.

On the way back, the veterans visited the ambush site between Kamalpur and Bakshiganj, where Y and C companies decimated a heavy mortar battery of the Pakistanis. The actual site would never have been recognised by the veterans without the guidance of Munshi. It was in fact he who guided the companies through the paddy fields and marshes to the ambush site in 1971. It was at this site that Satish Nambiar had killed two Pakistani soldiers manning a machine gun position, by first using a grenade, and then firing his Sten gun Machine Carbine. After much reminiscing and photography, the veterans boarded the minibus to resume the journey back. At Bakshiganj, notwithstanding the festive atmosphere and the crowds on account of Poyla Baisakh (the Bangladesh New Year) that day, Mahesh Sachdev got Munshi to indicate the place at which the Pakistani company commander Major Ayub (who had died of injuries sustained in an encounter with D company on night 4/5 December 1971) was buried, and placed a rose in homage.

The return journey was resumed, and half way between Bakshiganj and Jamalpur, Munshi took leave of the group; with much emotion and assurances that he would be asked to join in the Jamalpur Day celebrations in December 2014 when the Jangi Paltan is hopefully in an accessible peace station.

It was a matter of some disappointment that, due to the expansion of Jamalpur town over the last 42 years and the built-up areas that had come up, the group could not physically identify the sites South of Jamalpur where the intense battle (that led to the award of the Battle Honour “Jamalpur” to the Paltan), took place on night 10/11 December 1971. A battle that resulted in the deaths of a couple of hundred Pakistanis from 31 Baluch and rangers, in front of the Jangi Paltan positions, and the surrender of the Jamalpur garrison comprising another 300 or so personnel, to Y Company in the early hours of 11 December 1971. Even more disappointing was the fact that the Guest House in Jamalpur where the surrender was affected could not be located. Notwithstanding this, on the drive through Jamalpur, the thoughts of the Jangi Paltan veterans went out to those who had made the supreme sacrifice in that battle; Laxman Rane (who was awarded the Vir Chakra) and his section from D Company, and young Nalawade from the Y Company platoon with Rajendra Dafle. Subhash Kulkarni’s nostalgia about the lucky escape he had with “Bulbul” Brar, Bhiku Shirke and a couple of others, when they nearly walked into the Jamalpur garrison on night 9/10 December 1971, was quite evident.

The return journey to Ghatail Cantt was somewhat subdued with each of the veterans immersed in their

thoughts of the fateful period in 1971.

Major General Md Shafiqur Rahman in command of 19 Infantry Division was gracious enough to invite the Jangi Paltan veterans to a cultural programme and dinner that was held in the Cantt auditorium to celebrate the Bengali New Year 1421. A very lively evening was followed by the exchange of mementoes and a delicious dinner spread after which, a somewhat weary group of veterans and Indira Nambiar, were escorted to their rooms.

Tuesday, 15 April 2014: Tangail and Dhaka

Another nostalgic trip commenced with the departure from Ghatail Cantt at about 0800 hours Tuesday, 15 April 2014 after breakfast. The Jangi Paltan veterans were seen off by the Colonel Staff of HQ 19 Infantry Division and other officers whose hospitality had been spontaneous and overwhelming.

After about an hour's drive in the ubiquitous minibus, the group reached the bridge North of Tangail where, in 1971, the Jangi Paltan had caught up with Qader Siddiqui, and linked-up with 2 PARA (Maratha) led by Lieutenant Colonel Kulwant Pannu and his second in command, Major "Jumbo" Bhadha, a batchmate of Satish Nambiar. At the bridge, the group was met by Colonel Anwar Ul Alam who was deputy to Qader Siddiqui during the War of Liberation, and later Secretary and Ambassador. Following some nostalgic photographing, the group headed for the museum set-up by Colonel Anwar; a truly inspiring effort by an individual with the assistance of local volunteers. The Jangi Paltan veterans were treated to tea and snacks by Colonel Anwar and his charming wife.

Taking leave of Colonel and Mrs Anwar and his committed band of volunteers, the veterans headed for Dhaka; reaching there in time for lunch at the "Mahananda" VIP complex.

Following a quiet lunch, the veterans accompanied by Indira Nambiar visited the Bangabandhu Memorial. The group was received and taken around by one of the trustees of the Memorial. A truly moving experience that graphically depicted the killing of Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman and most of his family members on that fateful day of 15 August 1975. The members of the group recorded their feelings in the Visitors Book and departed in a sombre mood.

The dinner that evening was hosted by Brigadier Thimmaya and his charming wife Neena, at Khazana, an Indian restaurant. Thimmaya had managed to bring together an extraordinary group of invitees. That included a number of freedom fighters who participated in the War of Liberation, a couple of historians, and some of the Indian officers attending various courses of instruction in Bangladesh including the National Defence College and the Staff College. The evening was indeed a great success. At the conclusion of which, Brigadier Thimmaya was presented with the "Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on Horseback" memento, and Neena Thimmaya and Amardeep Sidhu with personal gifts.

Wednesday, 16 April 2014: Dhaka

At breakfast on Wednesday 16 April 2014, it was time for mutual farewells. Keshav Puntambekar, Mahesh Sachdev and Subhash Kulkarni departed for Mumbai shortly after noon and were seen off at the airport by the Assistant Defence Adviser, Squadron Leader HS Sidhu. Basant Ponwar left for Kolkata in the afternoon and was seen off by Major Mohsin.

Escorted by Brigadier Thimmaya and Major Mohsin, Satish Nambiar went to the Bangladesh Institute for Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT) at Rajenderpur Cantt to address officers attending a Military Observers course, on the subject "Future Trends in UN Peacekeeping". As it happened, the Commandant of the Institute, Major General Mohammad Maksudur Rahman had served as a Military Observer in UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia in 1992-93 as a young captain when Satish Nambiar was the Force Commander and Head of that Mission. Another nostalgic experience.

After addressing the course and having interesting interaction with the student officers over tea, Satish Nambiar returned to Dhaka for lunch at "Mahananda". While Indira, accompanied by Neena Thimmaya, was engaged in shopping that afternoon, Satish Nambiar rounded off the visit with nine holes of golf at the Army Golf Course in Dhaka.

Thursday, 17 April 2014: Departure

Satish and Indira Nambiar departed Dhaka at 0915 hours Thursday, 17 April 2014 and were seen off at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka, by Brigadier and Neena Thimmaya and Major Mohsin. A memorable visit had come to an end.

Two Salutes

The visit was an outstanding success at every level. Things could not have been better organised. All the veterans who made the trip are richer for the nostalgic experience that will without doubt add a few years to their lives. It would only be fitting to place on record our grateful thanks to the Defence Adviser at the High Commission of India in Dhaka, Brigadier PC Thimmaya, for the efforts he put in to make the visit so memorable, satisfying and rewarding in every way. It is a measure of his commitment, dedication and professionalism, and his rapport with the establishment in Bangladesh, that he was able to put together such a comprehensive programme of visit with the attendant administrative arrangements. The Jangi Paltan veterans salute him in the knowledge that with officers like him around, the future of the Indian Army is in safe hands. At the Paltan level, it is appropriate to place on record our grateful thanks to Keshav Puntambekar for his untiring efforts at coordination, and for his wise counsel at all times. Keshav, we salute you.

@Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd), a Padma Bhushan awardee, was commissioned on 15 Dec 1957 into 1 MARATHA LI and later commanded the same battalion and 20 MARATHA LI (10 MECH INF). He

participated in 1971 war as a company commander with 1 MARATHA LI in the Eastern Theatre and was decorated with Vir Chakra. He was the first Force Commander and Head of the UN Mission UNPROFOR in Yugoslavia and was Director USI from Jul 1996 to Dec 2008. Presently, he is a Distinguished Fellow at IDSA and an elected member of the USI Council.

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