

The Loss of F-149, The INS Khukri: Reminiscences of a Survivor — Commander Anil Kumar Kakar

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Abstract

The sinking of the INS Khukri, which was torpedoed off the coast of Diu by a Pakistani submarine PNS Hangor, in the 1971 war was a great loss for the Indian Navy after a very successful missile boat attacks on Karachi harbour. This article about the reminiscences of a Survivor — Commander Anil Kumar Kakar (Retd) is derived from the interview of the survivor by Sagat Shaunik and his subsequent article “1971: Salute to the ‘Silhouette of a Man’” which appeared as a chapter in the book ‘Untold Battlefield Tales’ by Sagat Shaunik as well as in the Fauji Magazine.

The Beginning

Commissioned as a Sub Lieutenant in the Indian Navy on 13 July 1970, Commander Anil Kumar Kakar completed basic training on 01 November 1971 and was posted on board INS Khukri as his first deployment. Captain Mahendra Nath Mulla was in command when he joined the ship. At that time war clouds were looming over East Pakistan (Bangladesh). INS Khukri was deployed at sea as part of the Western Fleet. Whilst at sea, war was declared on 04 December 1971. Captain Mulla was the Flotilla Commander for INS Khukri (F-149), INS Kuthar (F-146) and INS Kirpan (F-144). All three were anti-submarine-warfare (ASW) frigates (Type 14 Blackwood class) with dedicated anti-submarine munitions. Unfortunately, one of the flotilla's ships developed a

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLI, No. 626, October-December 2021.

problem and on around 05 December, she had been escorted back to harbour. By night 05/06 December 1971 it had docked safely.

Background

Short range of underwater target detection was a very serious shortcoming in the ASW frigates. The Navy was looking forward to overcoming and augmenting the detection range of sonar systems fitted on Khukri Class ships. On-board Khukri was an add-on equipment developed by BARC, Mumbai, aimed to improve the performance of Kukhri's British design Sonar 170B. Lieutenant AK Jain of the Indian Navy was the naval liaison officer working with BARC on this project and was on-board INS Kukhri.¹ Captain Mulla was very concerned with it because this was a nascent system whose efficacy was not validated. The ship put out to sea on night 6/7 December. It was reported that there was a Pakistani submarine operating off Kathiawar coast. The mission to Captain Mulla was to seek and destroy it. INS Khukri was accompanied by INS Kirpan.

Lieutenant Jain requested Captain Mulla if he could be given the assistance of an officer to operate his system along with him. Amongst the available junior officers on the ship, Captain Mulla nominated sub-lieutenant Kakar to be with Lieutenant Jain and told him to give Jain full assistance in all he required. The Torpedo & Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer (TASO) Lieutenant Manbar Singh; Lieutenant VK Jain and Anil Kakar had a small meeting to determine which of the two sonar systems namely Type 170 or Type 174 could be dovetailed with the new system created by Lieutenant Jain. A choice had to be made, as it needed a transducer from either of the sonars. Captain Mulla; Lieutenant Commander Joginder Krishan Suri (Executive Officer); Lieutenant Kundanmal Suresh Hiranand (Navigation & Direction Officer) and Lieutenant Manbar Singh (TASO) held a meeting, which Sub-Lieutenant Kakar attended being associated with Lieutenant Jain. After much deliberation and considering the requirement of the ship, with the possible benefits that may accrue with the new system; Captain Mulla decided that since war was on, the better system —Type 170 Sonar— must be available to the ship and Type 174 could be dovetailed with Lieutenant Jain's invention as he needed its transducer only.

The efficacy of the new system with 100% assurance was amiss, even the most sophisticated sonars today get false signals, which could be due to school of fish, sea bottom refraction, or even ambient noise. The new system was no exception, if at all, it was more pronounced towards getting marred by these concerns. As the ship commenced operating the new system married to the transducer of Type 174, many false signals raising undue alarms were being detected. Once again, Captain Mulla was very annoyed and wondered aloud *“how could the quarters that matter, allow a new system, that has not been tried, be fitted on the Ship at such a time, when war is in progress”!*

Of the false signals that were being picked up, any one of them could have been a lurking submarine, so, we had to go after those signals and verify them. Even Lieutenant Jain was a worried man. Jain and Kakar discussed on the 7th evening that they would request the TASO to give us Type 170 for a couple of hours, so that we could associate the new equipment with it. After seeking permission from the chain of command, they were allowed to do it for a couple of hours on morning 08 December 1971. With this, there was an appreciable improvement in the performance of equipment given by Lieutenant Jain. Then, the system was reconnected to the Type-174 transducer. As a matter of statement, the difference in range-detection capabilities of this system versus the system already fitted on the ship was 2.5 to 3 times. Captain Mulla with each passing moment was getting more and more disturbed and somehow controlled his anger. At one stage, he thought of disconnecting the new system and reverting to the legacy fitted transducer.

To clarify the subject as to how sonar systems function one can consider this akin to a visually disabled person looking for a small person in a big hall where the smaller person can always see him. So, ASW is a very challenging form of warfare as it is difficult to detect a submarine, which is the smaller person. The submarine in turn can detect the larger person (ship) earlier and with ease. The ship is the visually disabled person operating in the large hall called ocean. This analogy very roughly explains ASW challenges.

‘Action Stations’ on 09 December 1971

On 09 December, the Khukri picked up a contact three or four

times and went to attempt prosecuting the submarine by launching anti-submarine projectile ammunition (Limbo Mark 10 Anti-Submarine Mortars) that could be launched up to a range of 1000 yards (1 km) away from the ship. In comparison to these projectiles, a torpedo has a range to the tune of 15-20,000 yards (13-18 km) and many torpedoes are homer-type that use acoustic sensors to home on to the target. As it is difficult to distinguish between false and true signals; there was little option than to attack every strong signal. A paradoxical situation arose that if it were a false target, it would lead to quick attrition of the limited ammunition on board. The Captain was a very concerned man as it could be that either the contact was false or the submarine was beyond the detection range of our Sonar systems. Simultaneously, the ship was also having a bit of a problem in one of its operating systems. That evening, the ship took some time for repair, and it was brought back to operational state.

During wartime, operations of our ships were in a two-watch system called defence-watch system, implying that 50% of crew would be always closed up in their fighting quarters. As and when action-stations are sounded everybody closes up at respective battle stations. This is an established *modus operandi* and best way of working on a ship, so it was being followed. Anil Kakar had completed his watch at about 2015 hrs and Lieutenant Jain took over from him. Finishing dinner by 2035 hrs or so, Kakar went to his cabin to take some rest because at midnight he had to again close up on duty.

At 2046 hrs, the first torpedo hit the Khukri, knocking out its propeller and setting the ship ablaze on the aft side. Several failure alarms started ringing; Kakar recalls that he reacted and ran towards the bridge, which was three companionways ahead, to find out what was happening. By the time he was climbing up the second companionway to the bridge, the ship had started listing very rapidly to starboard (right) side. In that inclined position, he climbed up one more companionway to reach the bridge with difficulty. He did not find anybody in the bridge except for Captain Mulla who was sitting in his chair in a very calm and poised manner. As Kakar came up the companionway, he could only see Captain Mulla's back, water was gushing in rapidly, and his thought was to get to the port wing as quickly as possible. He glimpsed the silhouette of a man sitting on his chair in a calm and poised

manner, knowing fully well that he was staring into his death. His posture indicated that he was fearless, and the thought of death did not disturb him. Legend has it that Captain Mulla had a whiskey and a cigar in his hand. But Kakar states that neither did he see this nor could there have been any time for that. Captain Mulla simply discharged his directions and occupied his position with a lot of élan, that's all!

As the the ship was hit on its aft and the Bridge and living quarters were located forward of the vessel, therefore, the violent torpedo impact was perhaps not perceived in these areas. The off-duty crews had assembled on the alleyway, thinking that the ship was under some kind of aerial attack, and they didn't want to come out less they be strafed. We had power failure and all systems were affected. Our public-address (PA) system was not available and there was no way to communicate with crew except for personally going down and telling them.

Kakar's assigned duty was in the TAS control room, which was a deck below the bridge, so he wanted to reach TAS as quickly as possible, but the crew assembled in the alleyway blocked the way. While climbing, he realised that the ship had sustained an attack and was sinking, he then moved to the Bridge and Port Way. The ship sank in a matter of about two and a half minutes. Anybody who had not started coming out initially had no chance of escape. Indeed, there was a bit of panic which is but natural and could not be addressed through PA system. It was the brave actions by Captain Mulla and some other officers in taking the initiative to abandon ship and bring some control as also by the good training of our sailors which enabled the survival of those who got out.

The ship was listing rapidly towards starboard, Kakar jumped into the port (left) wing to escape the ship. No sooner did he jump to the port wing the ship quickly sank and he began to drown with her. The ship just took a couple of minutes to be obliterated from the horizon. The aft of the ship had taken in a lot of water, became heavy and listed to starboard. Commander Kakar recalls that he must have gone down 25-30 feet during the process of listing, aft sinking and the ship gyrating to become vertical with bows pointing skywards. He was disoriented and spinning underwater, in retrospect he states that he did not know what was happening to him!

But it appears God almighty has his own design. When a ship sinks as rapidly as the Khukri did, a lot of air gets trapped inside and under pressure seeks its way out. Perhaps, the bridge was one such escape route for the air and maybe God timed Kakar's location. He was being propelled in a circular fashion; the trapped air seeking its way out facilitated his escape from the sinking situation. Somehow, the timing was right, and the vortex moved him towards an opening and the escaping air ejected him clear off the ship. Had he been near that exit, a moment earlier or later, he would have been sucked down and wouldn't have been alive to narrate this experience!

During his traumatic experience Kakar had taken in seawater and furnace oil, upon surfacing he recalls the most unforgettable experience of racking regurgitation and gasping for air. Kakar states that even today his sleep is often disturbed by this experience. By God's grace a floating wooden grating piece came in his way, he caught hold of it and remained afloat in the water for over an hour. Khukri was operating off Diu, an area notorious for sea snakes. Kakar sensed a tingling sensation on his left leg and thought a snake was slithering. He involuntarily jerked his leg to discover that it was not a snake, it was the line of an inflatable life raft that got inflated by the jerk. Suddenly, he had this big life raft in front of him. He was tired and exhausted, his body coated with oil, and so it took an effort to get inside the life raft. The irony was that he apparently was the last man out of INS Khukri and the first man on that life raft. He thereafter started picking up anyone he could find. The first person he pulled in was Sub Lieutenant MS Ahluwalia, together they kept pulling in survivors. It was a 21-man life raft; they were able to pack in 29, they didn't want to leave anyone.

10 December 1971. On the morning of 10 December, Navy Search & Rescue (SAR) operations aircraft sighted the survivors. The survivors in the life raft where Kakar was were picked up by INS Katchall (P-81) an Arnala Class ASW Corvette commanded by Commander KN Zadu. His ship, with the survivors it had, was directed for a hunter-killer mission to seek and destroy the submarine and returned to Bombay harbour only on 14 December. Until then, Kakar states that he didn't really fathom what had happened. It was only when he finally stood on *terra firma*, he recalls a great feeling of thanksgiving.

The Aftermath

The survivors were given 30 days leave to go home, recuperate, and come back to continue service. Most of them suffered mental trauma, not openly talked about in those days. What could have happened if Captain Mulla had evacuated himself? Commander Kakar feels that a man of his intelligence and capabilities would have been an asset to the Indian Navy. In his death, the Indian Navy lost his great experiences of real time situations. Kakar strongly feel that if he had survived, he would have motivated many young officers towards a higher dedication that he personally exemplified in his own life. Administratively, there were two situations he would have faced, he could have either been rewarded or punished. What Commander Kakar says is that all this happened in his infant days of service. In a sub-Lieutenant's perception, Captain Mulla was a man who could have taken the navy to a greater place, so his loss was a great loss not just to the navy but to the nation as well.

Captain Mahendra Nath Mulla's brave act has motivated thousands of Indian Navy personnel who joined and served in the Indian Navy after 1971. His story always motivates all to perform to the best of their abilities. As for Commander (then Sub-Lieutenant) Kakar, he always held that Captain Mulla's silhouette placed him on a higher pedestal of thinking. Captain Mulla exemplified acceptance of responsibilities with a passion to serve. It took him a long way in life.

There were 67 survivors including 05 officers, 01 midshipman and 61 crewmembers. There were 194 men on board who were killed in action. The officers who survived in order of seniority were Lieutenant Commander Manu Sharma, NM; Sub Lieutenant MS Ahluwalia, NM; Sub Lieutenant VB Khanzode; Sub Lieutenant SK Basu, NM; Sub Lieutenant AK Kakar and Midshipman SN Singh. The list of the crew killed in action, is given below. Commander Anil Kumar Kakar believes that God has brought us in this world, so do our job well. He will only take you when either you are useless, or he needs you more! He is certain that God would have told Captain Mahinder Nath Mulla; *"bus karr yaara, saari duty kar lee, ab tu aithe aaja, aithe teri jaroorat bahut hegee"* (enough my friend, you have done your duty, now you come here, your presence is required more in heaven).

1971: INS Khukri (F-149) Honours List				
Rank	Name	Gallantry Award	Appointment	Actions
Captain(X)	Mahendra Nath Mulla	Maha Vir Chakra (Posthumous)	Commanding Officer	Supervised arrangements for evacuating ship, continued directing rescue operations and refused evacuation giving own lifejacket to a sailor. Having directed as many of his men as possible to leave ship, went back to Bridge to ensure further rescue operations. Last seen going down with his ship.
Lt Cdr (X)	Joginder Krishan Suri	Vir Chakra (Posthumous)	Executive Officer (2IC equivalent)	Rushed to cut life-saving floats and rafts, threw them in sea and directed men out. Continued evacuation after second torpedo.
Cdr (E)	Ommen Mukadavil Ommen	Vir Chakra (Posthumous)	Engineer Officer	Went below Ship to inform others to evacuate. Continued evacuation after second torpedo.
Lt Cdr (X)	Rajat Kumar Sen	Vir Chakra (Posthumous)	Supply Officer	Went below Ship to inform others to evacuate. Continued evacuation after second torpedo.
Surgeon Lt	Sudhansu Sekhar Panda	Vir Chakra (Posthumous)	Surgeon (RMO equivalent)	Went down to Ship's sick bay, ensured sick and wounded were brought on deck for evacuation. Continued evacuation after second torpedo.
Lt Cdr	Manu Sharma	Nao Sena Medal	Communications Branch Officer	Post Combat Survival Operations.
Sub Lt	Madanjit Singh Ahluwalia			
	Samir Kant Basu			

ROLL OF HONOUR (Derived from Website of the National War Memorial)

SI No	NAME	SI No	NAME
1.	CAPT M N MULLA, MVC	51.	SEA - II N CHAND
2.	LT CDR PRABHAT KUMAR, VrC	52.	SIG P CHAND
3.	LT CDR J K SURI, VrC	53.	LS SRIDHAR
4.	CDR M OMMEN, VrC	54.	CK(S) B RAM
5.	LT V K JAIN, NM	55.	LS DESONDHI MAL
6.	LT S H KUNDANMAL, NM	56.	STD - I P RAM
7.	SURG LT S S PANDA, VrC	57.	EAP 4 A SINGH
8.	LT MANBAR SINGH	58.	ME -I K B S GULERIA
9.	SLT S P S KUSHWAHA	59.	LEMR SALG RAM
10.	SLT SHASHI PRAKASH	60.	EAR 5 K C NANDH
11.	SLT SUSHIL KUMAR	61.	EAR 5 M SHARMA
12.	LT M SAMPAT KUMAR	62.	EAR 5 K CHAND
13.	LT D K SHARMA	63.	MCPO - II BANSILAL
14.	SLT S C SAPRA	64.	WM 3 K S MANKOTIA
15.	SLT SAMUEL ABRAHAM	65.	LME Y S BHARDWAJ
16.	LT CDR RAJAT KUMAR SEN	66.	STD - II JAGDISH CHAND
17.	MIDSHIPMEN A G PATIL	67.	POSTD H R SHARMA
18.	SLT G S SANDHU	68.	MCELP II O P KOHLI
19.	STD - II R MAHTO	69.	SEA - I G R NAIR
20.	SEA - I A K JHA	70.	POME M R C NAIR
21.	WTR - I M HALIM	71.	SEA-1 V K R PILLAI
22.	ERA IV G P SINGH	72.	SEA-I N S G K NAIR
23.	EAP IV S SINGH	73.	SEA-I JOHN THOMAS
24.	ERA 3 B N SINGH	74.	SEA-I K GURUDAS
25.	POME C KACHOHAP	75.	LS B SASIDHARAN
26.	PO S N RAM	76.	SEA-I R N SAHADEVAN
27.	SEA - II OM PRAKASH TYAGI	77.	SEA-I ZAINUDDIN
28.	SEA -II R S YADAV	78.	PO T C SIDHARTHAN
29.	EMR -I P L SHEEMAR	79.	SEA-I E P VERGHESE
30.	TOP - I P SINGH	80.	ME-I V N NARAYAN
31.	SIG I H SINGH	81.	TEL K P BHASKARAN
32.	ME-I HARI LAL	82.	PO TEL K S JOHN
33.	TOP - I NANDU BHAI	83.	ERA 3 P BALACHANDRAN
34.	LME R S NIMON	84.	PO TEL W P MANUEL
35.	SEA - II S S NIRWAL	85.	SEA II V VENUGOPAL
36.	SEA - I RAJ KUMAR	86.	ERA 2 M K UNNIKRIISHNAN
37.	LSIG S S YADAV	87.	SEA II C P KURIAN
38.	LME S S MALHAN	88.	EMP II A P MAHANAN
39.	LME RAMESHWAR	89.	LSTD T O VERGHESE
40.	SEA - I I SINGH	90.	ME II J N K NAIR
41.	TEL - I PARMA NAND	91.	TEL I S THOMAS
42.	POWTR R SINGH	92.	SEA I M V SOMRAJ
43.	SEA - II M RAM	93.	TEL N BALAN
44.	POSTD K SINGH	94.	SEA II P L DEVASSY
45.	TEL P S DHIMAN	95.	LEMP K M KURIAN
46.	SEA - II R SINGH	96.	EMP II S N KRISHNAN
47.	SIG I K K SUD	97.	EAP 4 P R KRISHNAN
48.	LTEL R S PARMAR	98.	EAR 5 E JOHN
49.	POME M SINGH	99.	EAP 3 T R RAJU
50.	SEA - I MOHINDER PAL	100.	ERA 4 K B SADHIES

SI No	NAME	SI No	NAME
101.	SA I K G DANIEL	148.	POCK JABHARDEN
102.	ME II K P MOIDEEN	149.	CK(O) P S RAWAT
103.	SEA I L G WERULKAR	150.	TEL A G RAJMANI
104.	TEL I W RAY	151.	LSIG P R LOKIAAH
105.	PO A LATIF	152.	LTEL A SABASTIAN
106.	EMP II K S THAKUR	153.	SEA-I S B SAMI
107.	LCK(S) S SHINDE	154.	PO C D MANDIRI
108.	LTEL P KULKARNI	155.	SEA-I A KABILAN
109.	STD I V R MORE	156.	ME-I G VENKATESAN
110.	ME I T R SALUNKE	157.	ME-I R GURUMURTHY
111.	LME J B PATIL	158.	CH YS M A PROSPERIAN
112.	ME I K KABBUR	159.	MAA K G NAIR
113.	LME B MALESAPPAR	160.	ME II R SHRINIVASAN
114.	TEL V DESHMUKH	161.	CK (O) A RAJU
115.	CK(S) I T N S SHETTY	162.	AG, LS K R JOSHI
116.	SEA I T SAMANTA	163.	SEA I R SANKER
117.	ERA 3 S MOHAN	164.	SEA I B S TANGNIYA
118.	LPM S LAL	165.	SEA II R B SINGH
119.	POELP J RAJ	166.	SEA I A K TRIPATHI
120.	SIG B DAS	167.	EMP II RAM ANJU
121.	CHME N SINGH	168.	POME R SINGH
122.	TEL B SINGH	169.	MECH-3 A P RANA
123.	SCPO A SINGH	170.	SEA I M S NEGI
124.	LWTR K SINGH	171.	TEL I H K MEHTA
125.	SWA 3 S K VERMA	172.	APP U C PANDEY
126.	POWTR H K SINGH	173.	ERA 4 L S SHARMA
127.	EMR II HARI MITTER	174.	ME II BANSHI LAL
128.	SEA II B SINGH	175.	SA I A RAM
129.	LCK M CHAND	176.	LS M G PANDEY
130.	POELP R SINGH	177.	ME I S N PATHAK
131.	EAP-4 INDERJIT	178.	PO N S KATHAIT
132.	EAP-4 B SINGH	179.	LS R SINGH
133.	SPO R PIARA	180.	LTOP OM PRAKASH
134.	EAP-3 S K PATHAK	181.	ME I V SINGH
135.	ERA-5 P SINGH	182.	EMR I A K KHANNA
136.	LWTR H SINGH	183.	LTEL B D MANNA
137.	EAP-2 J S HARIKE	184.	ME II P C MAITY
138.	STD-I S DASS	185.	ME I S K BISWAS
139.	LMA P SINGH SHEKHWAT	186.	CK I B K MANDAL
140.	CK(S) H SINGH	187.	AG ERA 4 K MUKHOPADYA
141.	CK-I G B SINGH	188.	SEA I A K SARKAR
142.	EAP-4 S C CHAUHAN	189.	SEA I S K DAS
143.	ME-1 B SINGH	190.	SEA I N SAMANTA
144.	EMR-II HIRALAL JAT	191.	LCK (O) P K SEN
145.	ME-II H R JAT	192.	SEA I S P DUTTA
146.	LS M SINGH	193.	TOP - I A LAL
147.	SEA-I P CHAND	194.	LME S B S CHAUHAN

Endnotes

¹ Dr. Arogyaswamy Paulraj “Reminisces On Dr. D Srinivasan”, Resonance(Special Issue) p.6 <http://www.oceansociety.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/resonance2.pdf>