

Operation Trident: A Triumph of the Indian Navy in the 1971 Indo-Pak War

Introduction

The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three Services on a large scale. The war was fought on two fronts, the Eastern and the Western. On the Eastern side, Pakistan adopted the defensive strategy to delay the ingress of Indian troops, while on the Western side, it adopted the aggressive policy to occupy some Indian territory so as to force the Indians to give up gains in East Pakistan and divert troops to the Western front. In contrast, India adopted a defensive strategy on the Western front and an offensive strategy on the Eastern front.¹

Role of Indian Navy

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

Planning and Objectives of Operation Trident

Operation Trident stands as one of the most remarkable naval operations in the history of the Indian Navy, executed during the Indo-Pak War of 1971. This daring offensive by the Indian Navy played a pivotal role in crippling Pakistan's naval capabilities during the war. It was a meticulously planned and executed operation, showcasing the strategic acumen and courage of Indian naval forces.

On the morning of 03 Dec 1971, Admiral SM Nanda, the Naval Chief, had gone to Bombay to address his officers and men about his intentions to take the war on the sea to Karachi, if, and when, the war breaks out. In the evening of the same day, the war started. The Pakistanis attacked our airfields, including Okha, at about 1830 hours on 03 Dec 1971.² The plan had been to strike Karachi with a composite force on the

very day that Pakistan carried out their first act of war. Since it was not possible for our forces to arrive at a point 150 miles from Karachi to commence the run-in the same evening, it was decided to launch the operations on the following day, i.e., the night of 04/05 Dec 1971.

Commander Babru Bhan Yadav was a specialist in anti-submarine warfare and with one year on missile boats, he was considered an ideal candidate to command a Frigate. With the threat of war looming, Commander Babru Bhan, on 02 Dec 1971, was given the command of 25th 'K' (Killer) Squadron.³

On 04 Dec 1971, the Task Group for the operation consisted of three Vidyut class missile boats, Indian Navy Ship (INS) Nipat, INS Nirghat and INS Veer from the 25th 'Killer' Missile Boat Squadron, escorted by two Petya Class Frigates, INS Kiltan and INS Katchall, and a Fleet Tanker, INS Poshak.⁴ The task group was led by the Commanding Officer of the 25th Squadron, Commander Babru Bhan Yadav, embarked on INS Nipat. The Pettyas were intended to provide communication and control and with their better radar give indications of suitable targets. In the event of an emergency, they could take a boat in tow and, if necessary, give fuel. The two types of vessels use the same fuel, though the missile boats use extra refined diesel of special specifications. At 1730 hours, they were off Dwarka, which is approximately 150 miles from Karachi. The order was given for Operation Trident to commence, and the force raced towards Karachi by the direct route. Out of the four, one missile boat was ordered to remain on patrol off Dwarka to provide cover for the force on its way back.

Execution of the Operation

The Task Group reached 250 nm (about 285 miles) south of Karachi and stayed in the area during the day, outside the range of Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The plan was to attack Karachi at night because most PAF aircraft did not possess night-bombing capability. In the evening on 04 Dec 1971, INS Kiltan and the three missile boats approached Karachi, evading Pakistani reconnaissance aircraft and surface patrol vessels. The Pakistani authorities had warned all merchant ships bound for Karachi not to approach the harbour to within 70 miles between sunset and dawn. This meant that any unit picked up on the radar within that distance was most likely to be a Pakistani naval vessel on patrol. Leaving the Petya behind, the boats speeded up to 32 knots on the approach to their destination. At 2230 hours Pakistan Standard Time, the Task Group converged about 70 nm (about 80 miles) South of Karachi and detected Pakistani targets, about 43 miles to the North-West and North-East.⁵

The contact to the Northwest was engaged by missile boat INS Nirghat with two missiles. The Pakistani destroyer Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) Khaiber was patrolling the Southwest approaches to Karachi and only at about 2215 hours was she able to appreciate that an enemy force was approaching Karachi. She then altered course and

increased speed to intercept INS Nirghat, the rate of closing was about 60 knots. At about 2240 hours, when PNS Khaiber was within range. INS Nirghat fired her first missile. PNS Khaiber opened fire with her close-range anti-aircraft guns but did not succeed in preventing the missile from hitting her. Her boiler room was hit, and her speed came down to eight knots. A second missile was ordered to be fired at her and after the second hit, her speed came down zero and dense smoke started rising from the ship. She sank after about 45 minutes approximately 35 miles South-Southwest of Karachi. The contact to the Northeast was engaged by missile boat INS Nipat with two missiles. INS Nipat was able to get her within range and fired the first missile which scored a hit. A second missile was fired soon after and when this hit the ship, a huge flash went up to about twice the height of the ship. It was learnt later that this was a merchant ship MV Venus Challenger. A third contact appeared to the North. It was engaged by missile boat Veer with one missile. The ship was set on fire by this missile and was seen burning fiercely for over 70 minutes, and finally sank in that position about 19 miles to the South of Karachi. It was learnt later that this was the Pakistan Navy coastal minesweeper PNS Muhafiz.⁶

Meanwhile Commander Yadav, the Commander of the missile boats, ordered Nipat and Veer to proceed further towards Karachi and press home the attack. INS Nipat was ordered to fire one more missile on a shore target if no ships were seen in the anchorage. INS Veer which was close to the harbour identified two targets close to each other and carried out a missile attack on both with only one missile.⁷ INS Nipat selected the oil refineries at Karachi harbour and fired one missile at them exactly at midnight, causing a tremendous flash and an orange glow which could be seen for miles over that part of the coast.

Commander Yadav then issued the order for the boats to withdraw. Due to a fade out in communications, the Commander of the Task Group in INS Kiltan did not receive this withdrawal signal. He continued to close Karachi. When he arrived at the predetermined point, 20 miles South of Karachi he found himself all alone. Except for missile boat INS Veer, everybody else had turned round and was headed back towards Saurashtra at full speed. Due to a machinery problem, INS Veer had reduced speed to effect repairs.

At that point, the task force pulled back. In due course, ships of the Task Group arrived on the Saurashtra Coast in ones and twos, refuelled on 05 Dec 1971 and arrived in Bombay on 06 Dec 1971.

Conclusion

The missile attack by the Indian Navy was expertly planned and executed. The attack caught Pakistan's Armed Forces Command completely off guard and caused significant disruption. While PNHQ was unaware of the sinking of PNS Muhafiz, a disorganised

and chaotic rescue operation was initiated to find and recover survivors of PNS Khaibar. The survivors of PNS Muhafiz, who were saved when a patrol boat headed towards its flaming debris while looking for survivors from the PNS Khaibar, informed PNHQ of the fate of the ship. With no casualties or damage to the Indian Task Group, which made a safe return to Indian ports, Operation Trident was hailed as a great success for the Indian Navy. For the first time, anti-ship missiles were used in the region. Commander Babru Bhan Yadav was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his gallant action, and the Navy celebrates 04 Dec as 'Navy Day'⁸ to honour the battle. The success of this operation prompted another successful attack on Karachi on 08 Dec 1971, known as Operation Python.

In today's time, Operation Trident exemplifies the strategic significance of maritime power in contemporary conflicts. Its legacy inspires modern doctrines emphasising joint operations, the utility of advanced missile systems, and the importance of maintaining dominance in strategically vital maritime regions.

¹ Stories of Heroism (PVC & MVC Winner). Dr. BC Chakravorty (1995). Allied Publishers Limited and Ministry of Defence, Government of India

² Hiranandani, G M. 2000. Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy, 1965-1975. New Delhi: Director Personnel Services (DPS); New Delhi London.

³ n.d. Gallantry Awards Portal. <https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/5039>.

⁴ Cardozo, Ian. 2021. 1971: Stories of Grit and Glory from the Indo-Pak War. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Ebury Press.

⁵ "Bravehearts of Killer Squadron: Recalling Indian Navy's 1971 Valour." n.d. Indian Defence Review. Accessed April 4, 2024. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/bravehearts-of-killer-squadron-recalling-indian-navy-1971-valour/>

⁶ Sethi, Captain S S. 2021. "Western Maritime Front and the Naval War of 1971 - Defence Research and Studies." Defence Research and Studies. May 11, 2021. <https://dras.in/western-maritime-front-and-the-naval-war-of-1971/>.

⁷ "The Veer Ahir Who Set Karachi Ablaze." 2013. Hindustan Times. June 23, 2013.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/the-veer-ahir-who-set-karachi-ablaze/story-Qn5CTypParRpoT36AGQeoJ.html>.

⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/videos/watch-why-india-celebrates-navy-day-on-december-4/article68948214.ece>