

# 1971 – An Excursion in Sindh : Notings from a Soldier's Diary

Captain Shekhar Dutt, SM, IAS (Retd)\*

## Editor's Note

*This is a narration of events of the 1971 War in Barmer – Naya Chor (Sindh-Pakistan) Sector, seen through the eyes of a young Captain Shekhar Dutt, SM, who later joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and rose to be the Defence Secretary. The narration takes place in the backdrop of operations of 11 Infantry Division (11 Inf Div), which was tasked to advance to Naya Chor – Umarkot across the international border and pose a threat to Hyderabad (Sindh-Pakistan). Shekhar Dutt was posted in 218 Medium Regiment (218 Med Regt) and was affiliated as Forward Observation Officer (FOO) to 3 Independent Armoured Squadron (3 (I) Armd Sqn), equipped with T/55 tanks. This squadron supported by a company of 2 MAHAR was to spearhead the attack in this sector.*

*Captain Shekhar Dutt carried a small green rexene jacketed note book 2.5"x 4" in his dungaree (overalls) pocket; wherein he made very cryptic entries which have been elaborated from his memory in this narration. The elaborated entries have been edited at places to keep the narrative short and to the point, but what appears in the pages that follow is generally his own words. Nothing has been edited in the narrative that either changes the events or thoughts or the context.*

*The actual entries in the note book are highlighted and have been produced verbatim. Please refer to **Sketch P** while reading the narrative.*

---

\*Captain Shekhar Dutt, SM, IAS (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery on 06 August 1969. After release from the Army he joined the Indian Administrative Service and rose to be the Defence Secretary from 29 July 2005 to 31 July 2007. After retirement he served as the Deputy National Security Adviser for two years. Presently, he is serving as the Governor of Chattisgarh since 23 January 2010.

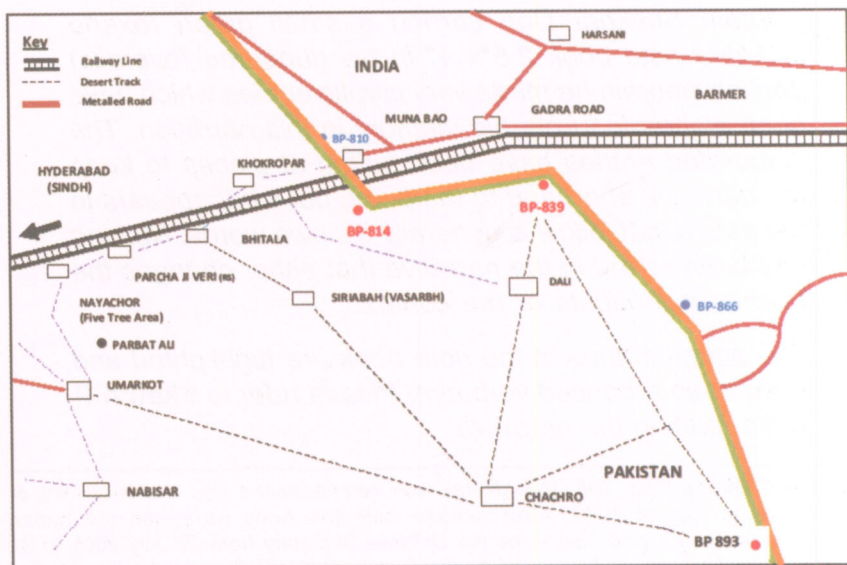
## Entry on 21/10 : Joined 3 (I) Armd Sqn.

### Came to Forward Assembly Area (FAA).

On 21<sup>st</sup> Oct 1971, I along with my Observation Post (OP) team joined 3 (I) Armd Sqn at FAA, situated North of Muna Bao – Khokhropar – Hyderabad (Sindh) railway track. We found that if the OP party, with its radio sets etc, got inside the gunner's compartment of the T55 tank then the tank commander and the gunner would not be able to operate efficiently. The Squadron Commander, Major Mehta explained that at best only I could be accommodated in the gunners' compartment of the tank. Realising that there was no point in being cut off from my Technical Assistant (TA) and Operator Radio Artillery (ORA); I declined the offer and chose to sit on the turret straddling the Anti Aircraft (AA) Gun, with my boys sitting on either side of the turret. As the tank moved with its hatches closed, I found that I had the best view and knowledge of the surrounding areas.

AREA OF OPERATIONS

Sketch P



NOT TO SCALE



In the event of a war, 3 (I) Armd Sqn was to enter Pakistan from the North of the railway track. It would go behind the Pakistani post at Bhitla and the neighbouring areas. Another group was to cross the border from South of the railway track and onwards to Chachro. The Div spearheaded by 85 Inf Bde would move into Pakistan from Gadra Road – Muna Bao Axis near Border Pillars (BP) 810 and 814, straddling the railway track, and onwards to Khokhropar and beyond to Naya Chor. The task of 3 (I) Armd Sqn was to outflank the Pakistani positions so that the main force of the Division found it easy to progress through the enemy defences.

## The Team



**2<sup>ND</sup> Lieutenant Veeru Jetley, Captain Vikram Deuskar, VrC (Sqn 2IC), Lieutenant Murdhar Singh, the Author and the Tank Driver Bhik Singh**

**Entry on 4 Dec (2200 hrs) : Entered Pak from BP 810.**

The armoured group chose to enter at night from BP 810. Complete radio silence was maintained. We moved from the FAA at about 1900 hrs and it took us three hours of fast cross country movement to reach the border.

I think it was on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December that we had three visitors to the sqn. They were Lieutenant Colonel Alexander,

Commanding Officer (CO) of a Madras battalion, Major Viroo Mehta and Captain Upreti of 70 Armd Regt. They were going to join their formation/unit South of Chachro. I remember they had a meal with us in the open desert. Major Viroo Mehta told us that he had put in his papers and that his discharge from the Army was almost through. However, since the war had started he chose to experience the war first and would then leave the Army. After the meal, they left in a small convoy.

*Few days later we heard that this convoy was ambushed by the enemy and Lieutenant Colonel Alexander and Major Viroo Mehta were killed while Captain Upreti escaped with a serious injury in one of his eyes. I have always thought that the intrinsic romance of taking part in an operation makes heroes out of brave men. Major Mehta was drawn into such a romance.*

**Entry on 5 Dec (0600 hr) : Entered Bhitla. Pak forces ran. Got some material.**

**First to fire Med Guns.**

Before the day break we had reached our first destination and started engaging the enemy with direct tank fire as well as artillery fire from the med guns. The Pakistanis had absolutely no clue where this fire was coming from. Radio silence was maintained and full surprise was achieved. Bhitla is on the Pakistan Western Railway and beyond Khokhropar railway station, which is a key station on that track. The bulk of the Pakistani forces got jittery and scattered. On initial searching of some of the Pakistani positions we found valuable clues regarding their formations and composition etc. As we could not afford to lose time we carried on towards Naya Chor leaving the mopping up operations to be done by the forward elements of 85 Inf Bde.

**Entry on 6 Dec (1300 hr) : Entered Vasarbh. No opposition.**

**(1500 hr) : Mines blow off Colonel Handa and Brigadier Kataria. Vikram Burns got it badly (later died).**

When we were advancing towards Naya Chor, sitting on the turret of my tank, I heard a loud blast. This was a bit strange as, so far, the progress had been without any major opposition. The noise had come from behind us and after a while we could see a column



of black smoke from the general area of Bhitala. I drew the attention of the tank commander and it was decided that we turn back with a troop of tanks and engage any Pakistani elements who may have caused that blast. On reaching the site we found that the 85 Inf Bde Commander, Brigadier Kataria's vehicle had gone over an anti-tank mine. Brigadier Kataria had a bone injury and Colonel Handa, who was the CO of 164 Field Regiment (164 Fd Regt), was also injured. However, the young Intelligence Officer (IO), Second Lieutenant Vikram Burns Appalaswami suffered the most grievous injuries and died while being evacuated. The fact that the Bde Commander had come so far ahead demonstrated that the 85 Inf Bde had been advancing at a rather fast pace. I knew the three officers fairly well and felt very sorry to see a look of dejection, especially on the face of Brigadier Kataria who I had always seen displaying exceptional enthusiasm. I recall him telling us to carry on and that he would return to take part in the operation before long. Vikram Burns on the other hand was showing no signs of any response and perhaps had had a massive internal injury. I felt really sorry for him as only a few days ago he had presented me with a book on the war in Vietnam. After ensuring that the Bde Commander and the other injured were evacuated for treatment, we resumed our advance towards Naya Chor.

**Entry on 7 Dec (0700 hr) : Firing came from Parcha Ji Veri (RS).**

Parcha Ji Veri RS is one station short of Naya Chor and almost at the end of the Pakistani desert and had a spattering of shrubs and bushes. For the first time since we entered Pakistan we came under effective enemy fire. We took positions and engaged them with tank as well as artillery fire from our Med Regt.

**Entry on 7 Dec (1000 hr) : Entered Parcha Ji Veri (RS) under heavy enemy arty fire.**

The Pakistanis were desperately trying to stop our armoured group. However, because we had divided them from their troops at Khokhropar and Bhitala, they were not able to regroup and give us any worthwhile resistance. We entered Parcha Ji Veri RS and

found that it had a fairly large compound and well constructed railway infrastructure. However, all through the day the Pakistani artillery kept on pounding our positions in the RS complex. We spread out and made good use of whatever little cover was available.

**Entry 7 Dec (1500 hr) : Under heavy enemy air attack. Four Sabres.**

**Registered couple of tgts. Stayed the night in Parcha Ji Veri.**

Our camouflage drill paid dividends as the sky was soon swarming with F 86 Sabre jets which circled around Parcha Ji Veri and strafed and bombed whatever they could sight. Some of our three tonners, mainly supply vehicles, were hit. We used our medium machine guns with great effect which kept the enemy fighters at bay. I noticed that Pakistani aircraft on their way back from bombing missions in India dropped their munitions on forward Indian positions (like our position at Parcha Ji Veri). I reckoned that in order to prevent the possibility of damage due to friendly fire, Pakistani units identified their own positions to their returning aircraft by firing smoke shells in a linear fashion demarcating the area held by Indian troops. Paying back in their own coin, on a few occasions, I fired the same colour of smoke shells as a linear target deep inside the Pakistani positions. This led the Pakistani aircraft to strafe and bomb their own positions thinking that it was held by the Indian troops. Since the Pakistani forces were lulled to believe that their own aircraft would not bomb them, they were careless in their movements and thereby attracted the friendly fire. All through the afternoon, I ranged and registered a number of targets. We had dug in and stayed that night in the Parcha Ji Veri area. I slept under the tank quite comfortably. Since the time the operation had started this was the first night that I had really slept.

**Entry 8 Dec (0600 hr) : Left Parcha Ji Veri RS towards SW.**

**Under heavy Pak arty fire.**

We wanted to take a short detour to Naya Chor and outflank it from the South. However, Pak arty fire continued relentlessly forcing us to take a wider detour.



**Entry 8 Dec (1200 hr) : Went with one troop of tanks to relieve 10 SIKH LI under counter attack. Our heavy arty fire beats off counter attack.**

**(1300 hr) : We chased them and ran into their arty fire.**

**(1500 hr) : We come back in 10 SIKH LI area.**

**Whole night under shelling.**

While we were taking a detour to outflank Pakistani positions, we came to know that there was a counter attack on the 10 SIKH LI position. Sqn Commander, Major Mehta asked me to take a troop of tanks to support 10 SIKH LI. I readily agreed. While approaching 10 SIKH LI position, I ranged and targeted the Pak arty positions as well as the advancing Frontier Force Battalion. By this time, our fd arty guns had also become available. Our accurate fire broke up the counter attack. We gave the Pakistanis a chase. As we went closer to their positions we encountered rather heavy arty shelling. This was obviously a well entrenched defensive position and the Pakistanis were desperately trying to defend it.

**Entry 9 Dec (1000 hr) : I engaged some targets.**

**Our HF-24 aircraft rocketed two tanks of Pakistan and burnt them.**

In the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> for the first time we got a hint that Pakistani tanks were around. We located some of their possible sites and I 'ranged' them with our guns and conveyed the information to our Air Force. Panic stricken, two enemy tanks broke cover and were spotted by our HF 24 aircraft, which knocked them out. It was a beautiful sight seeing the pair of Marut aircraft coming almost at tree top level, then climbing up and again diving while releasing their rockets at the enemy tanks.

**Entry 9 Dec (1300 hr) : Engaged targets.**

**(1900 hr) : Came back to rejoin rest of our tanks.**

From the flanks of the 10 SIKH LI position I had a panoramic view of the Pakistani defences. A larger number of our fd arty batteries were becoming available to me and I was able to bring down our

field as well as medium artillery on the enemy. However, as our troop of tanks had been away from the main squadron for over a day by now, it was decided that we rejoin them.

**Entry 10 Dec : Enemy air came over twice but could not locate us. Whole day we kept our arty fire on various enemy tgts.**

Havaladar Keshav Singh, my Mike NCO (for laying telephone lines), was proving to be a man worth his weight in gold as he kept me in contact not only with the Arty Bde Headquarters but also with the regiments and batteries. During the last few days I had noticed that the Pakistanis had breached our radio net. In order to counter such a possibility, during the exercises I had developed a simple but fail-safe code with Keshav. I used to call him on the PRC 25 radio set and give an indication that we should start operating our own code. He would then switch on to another pre-arranged frequency and receive my instructions, again change the frequency and communicate. For every new communication we had a pre-arranged method of changing the frequency and communicated with each other without any possibility of being intercepted. Havaladar Keshav Singh would then relay my instructions to the concerned gun positions on line. Keshav was responsible for laying the cables for these lines and connecting me with the gun positions.

*Many years later in 1991, when I was Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Defence responsible for major projects, electronics and ship building, I was educated about the technology of 'frequency hopping' radio sets then just being introduced in military warfare. Keshav and I apparently had hit on this concept of frequency hopping and used it successfully in the 1971 war much before the development of the technology. I was, therefore, never out of contact with my guns.*

**Entry 11 Dec (0300 hr) : Attack started by 10 SIKH and 2 Mahar.**

**(0400 hr) : All objectives secured.**

**(0400 hr) : We moved in for out flanking manoeuvre.**

This was a major offensive on a feature called Parbat Ali. The attack started much before day break. The units of 85 Inf Bde, i.e. 10 SIKH and 2 MAHAR, overran some of the Pakistani positions. Even in darkness we could see the disarray amongst the



Pakistanis. The Sikh and the Mahar war cries were resonating in the desert. In panic, the enemy left their trenches, many of them in underclothing. Later we found that their soldiers, and especially the officers, were a rather indisciplined lot as evidence pointed to the recent presence of women in their trenches. This was in stark contrast with the discipline existing in the Indian Army. The attack on Parbat Ali was undertaken with complete surprise. Some enemy elements were seen sneaking in the general direction of Naya Chor and it was necessary to cut them off. Therefore, we moved our tanks on an out-flanking manoeuvre.

**Entry 11 Dec (0900 hr) : Ran into dense anti-tank minefield 4000 yards South of Naya Chor.**

**(1100 hr) : Under intense Pak mortar fire. Three tanks caught in the minefield blew. I engage enemy mortars (Target U 1111) by 164 Fd Regt.**

I still recall that morning of 11 December. It was biting cold with low visibility. At a distance of about half a kilometre we could see people running away from us. My TA Virender Pal Singh looked up at me from his perch on the side of the turret with a silly grin. I asked him what had happened. He told me that his rifle was not firing. Apparently, he was trying to fire at some shadowy figures about 250 meters away. I told him to hold his fire because they might be our men. As the tank closed in we found that, indeed, they were 10 SIKH troops carrying out mopping up operations. Our tanks continued moving forward, cleared a hump and suddenly came into a depression. The first few tanks went 30-50 yards into the depression. Lieutenant Murdhar's tank was the first one and I was sitting atop the second tank. There was a loud thud like sound and my tank, on whose turret I was sitting, suddenly jumped a couple of feet. Then the tank sank in the sand with a big jerk. The bogey wheels of my tank had been disengaged from the tracks thus making the tank completely immovable. Suddenly it was all quiet. The tanks had all stopped in their tracks. I realised that my tank had gone over an anti-tank mine. Thirty yards ahead on our left Murdhar's tank had also halted but it was safe. At a distance on my right I could see one more tank squatting in a peculiar position, clearly incapacitated by another anti-tank mine. It was clear that our tanks had gone into a minefield. In a little

while, I heard some high pitched whistling sounds over my head. A minefield is usually covered by small arms fire and we realised that the whining sound was that of bullets flying over our heads. Thus, it was only a matter of time before the Pakistanis would engage us with recoilless (RCL) guns or other anti-tank weapons. Therefore, we decided to get off the tanks and walk back in the direction we had come from, and take cover behind the hump. I took all our weapons and ammunition, picked my camera and radio from inside the gunner's compartment and put them in my haversack. I was about to disembark when the tank driver, Bhik Singh, stopped me from getting down. He told me *"Sir, aap mere piche chalo, jahan per main pair rakhta hoon, wahein apna pair dalo."* He wanted me to follow him and step at the same places where his steps fell. Only much later did I realise that Bhik Singh knew that where anti-tank mines were laid there could be anti personnel mines also. He was risking his life in order to give me a better chance.

Lieutenant Murdhar Singh's tank, which was the first to enter and travelled the maximum distance into the minefield, miraculously did not go over a mine. Showing tremendous bravery, Murdhar later went back to his tank and with the help of his driver and a Sapper NCO, backed the tank out of the minefield following exactly the same tracks it had made while entering the minefield. Murdhar and the Sapper NCO walked along the tracks guiding the driver to exactly retrace the tank's earlier path. Thus, the tank could rejoin the battle. After this, Murdhar and I rode the same tank, with me sitting on top of the turret. Without doubt Lieutenant Murdhar Singh and Driver Bhik Singh were among the bravest men.

*Many years later, in 2005, when I was Defence Secretary and attending the Raising Day function of Skinner's Horse, I asked about Bhik Singh and was told that he had passed away a few years ago. I also asked about Murdhar Singh and was informed that he had probably made it to a Lieutenant Colonel, but his present whereabouts could not be confirmed.*

**Entry 11 Dec (1300 hr) : Came back to Raj Rif area with rest of the tanks.**

**(1500 hr) : Enemy air spotted our tks.**

We regrouped in 22 RAJ RIF area and continued on our mission



to completely overcome the defences at Parbat Ali. By this time elements of an Indep Inf Bde had joined us, greatly improving our strike capability. Our fire power was also improving day by day as I was finding more artillery regiments on my net. The Pakistani Air Force, consisting mostly of F 86 Sabres, occasionally circled around us and took on isolated supply or ammunition vehicles but could not damage any of our tanks.

**Entry 11 Dec (1700 hr) : 4 Sabres came and get the two stranded tanks.**

**(1800 hr) : Pak RCLs blow the same two tanks off. Own arty fired the whole night.**

This was expected. Pakistanis were, however, not willing to risk their soldiers in their own minefield and attempt to recover our tanks.

**Entry 12 Dec (0800 hr) : Four Sabres come back but could not locate us.**

All through the day we regrouped and prepared for the final assault on Parbat Ali.

**Entry 13 Dec (0400 hr) : 10 SIKH and 2 MAHAR attack and capture Parbat Ali occupied by 39 FFR. Heavy Pakistani casualties. 350 captured.**

The final assault on Parbat Ali was well planned and didn't give the enemy much chance. We used our guns to the fullest advantage and took on the targets that we had ranged and registered earlier with precision, accuracy and volume. The enemy who was well dug in and entrenched, gave in and this time our forces were able to fully occupy the Pakistani positions at Parbat Ali.

**Entry 14 Dec : Moved to 10 SIKH LI area.**

10 SIKH LI was preparing to launch an attack on Pakistani positions near Naya Chor. The area was registered as an arty target and named 5 Tree Area. It was, as the name suggests, the beginning of their green belt. There was a village on one side. The whole day I ranged and registered various targets in the area.

**Entry 15 Dec : 10 SIKH LI attacks on village and 5 Tree Area. Heavy enemy arty fire. 10 SIKH LI suffers a lot of casualties. Capt Sengupta (Arty OP) injured. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Bahadur (10 SIKH LI) killed.**

The resistance from the Pakistanis was severe because 10 SIKH LI had moved into the range of their arty. Unfortunately, they lost the services of their OP officer Captain Sengupta of 164 Fd Regt. I volunteered to replace Captain Sengupta and went in the direction of 10 SIKH LI. There was a great deal of firing. While I was running towards them I saw one of their company commanders, Major Arora whose leg seemed to have been almost severed, being evacuated. There were many other casualties. Colonel Basant Singh, the CO of 10 SIKH LI, was calmness personified. He was very happy that I had come. A Pakistani Lysander observation aircraft was hovering in the skies. The Pakistanis were firing airburst shells which were causing maximum casualties. As their OP officer had been injured, 10 SIKH LI became rather vulnerable without any arty support. Also, their forward elements were within the machine gun range of the enemy. Taking advantage of all this, the Pakistanis had launched a counter attack on 10 SIKH LI and were approaching under the cover of arty fire. I immediately started directing fire on the Pakistani gun positions and also the machine gun posts which I had already 'ranged and registered' the day before. With some corrections I was able to bring down fire on the Pakistani guns.

That afternoon I was returning after consultations with Colonel Basant Singh, CO 10 SIKH LI, when I noticed TA Virender Pal Singh communicating on the radio. I heard him saying "*To confuse enemy aircraft*". He repeated this number of times. I asked him whom he was speaking with. He told me that he was giving the target description to the gun position for firing smoke shells at least 2/3 kilometres inside the Pakistani held territory. This he was doing, he said, as the Pakistani aircraft had gone out for a sortie and would soon be returning. Virender Pal Singh was ensuring that the returning Pakistani aircraft would be confused into bombarding their own troops. Within a few seconds our guns had fired their smoke shells deep in Pakistani territory and indeed the returning Pakistani air sortie emptied their remaining ammunition on their own troops.



*TA Virender Pal Singh was awarded a mention in despatches for his adventurous presence of mind and initiative to bring harm to the enemy in the operation.*

**Entry 16 Dec : Engaged lot of enemy tgts. Am still in SIKH LI area village.**

**A very difficult time. Heavy shelling, chaps killed in next trench. Shift to B Coy. Engage DFs. Stay whole night under air attack and shelling.**

This was a very difficult day. 10 SIKH LI was in an open and plain area which was obviously a known and registered Pakistani arty and air target. During one spell of intense shelling I, with my TA and Operator had taken shelter in a trench when there was a loud noise very close by. This was a direct hit by a Pakistani shell on a trench very near us which I believe had more than three soldiers – all of whom were killed. I decided to shift to Bravo Company as it gave us a better field of vision. I found at least one more subscriber on my radio net indicating the addition of another arty regt with us. I believe it was 68 Fd Regt. This boosted our fire power considerably. Realising the intention of the enemy, I started engaging a series of Defensive Fire (DF) targets. The Pakistanis were also obviously desperate to prevent Indian ingress. The whole night shelling went on from both sides. The Pakistanis also carried out a few air raids at night.

**Entry 17 Dec : Two East Bengali Officers Capt Hussain, AMC and one from Engrs surrendered. Get a lot of info. Mulla Feroze and Dastoor capture confirmed. 4 to 5 Sabres come thrice and strafe and bomb. Some damage to soft vehicles. Their GOC, ex GOC, a lieutenant col and a maj were hit by our air. Pakistan agrees to our call for cease fire at 2000 hr today. Dhaka surrendered at 1101 hr on 16 Dec.**

On the morning of 17 December a number of East Bengali officers in the Pakistan Army sneaked across towards our position. Two such officers came right across my position. They told me that Flight Lieutenant Mulla Feroze and Captain Dastoor had been captured when they strayed and bumped into Pakistani elements

that were in the process of retreating from Bhitla/Khokhropar. Immediately I realised how the Pakistani side had breached into our radio net. Being the Air Control Team (ACT) with tentacle, the two Indian officers were in possession of all frequencies and diagram of our Radio Net and that must have fallen into Pakistani hands. My pre-war arrangement of alternate communication channel with Keshav Singh, therefore, had paid us rich dividends. The two East Bengali officers told us about the loss sustained by the Pakistanis, especially some of their General rank officers. They also spoke about their own relief and joy that Dhaka had fallen. By evening, it was clear that there would be "All Quiet on the Western Front." Cease fire was agreed.

**Entry 18 Dec : GOC 11 Div, Commander Inf Bde and  
Commander Arty Bde come to SIKH LI position.**

Without losing any time the three commanders of the main formations taking part in our sector of operations, namely GOC 11 Inf Div, Commander 85 Inf Bde and Commander 11 Arty Bde, came together to 10 SIKH LI position and met the CO, officers and men, and visited the forward most unit of the Div which had suffered the maximum casualties. This speaks volumes regarding the quality of leadership present in the Indian Army during Operation Cactus Lily (as this operation was code named). As a young captain, albeit on a ringside seat, I found this to be a remarkable event and wrote this as the last entry of my diary in the war.

**Epilogue**

*Nostalgia tends to add colour to events, forcing an element of subjectivity into a narration. To retain objectivity, I have stuck to the cryptic notes of a fairly ancient and war torn pocket note book. There was a sense of adventure, an enthusiasm for combat and a great sense of team spirit in the youngster who penned these small thoughts. I am sure it was true of all of us who were my age and service and had the good fortune of being part of the 1971 War. History was being made but this was the last thing in our minds when actual tasks and combat were an obsession. There will be much time and occasion to draw lessons and see the events in a larger perspective. I have purposely denied myself the benefit of hindsight and experience so as to retain the flavour of youthful participation. I will leave the scholarly part for another occasion.*