

***Wars – As Seen Through Soldiers' Eyes (Based on their personal experiences)***

## **Difficult To Die**

**Colonel Brij Bhushan Midha (Retd)\***

### **Editor's Note**

*Colonel Brij Bhushan Midha commanded a rifle platoon of B Company, 4 GUARDS in Bangladesh War. His account of the war as he saw it as a subaltern, fresh from the Officers Training School, covers the period from 01 Dec 71 to 10 Jun 1972 when 4 GUARDS was deinducted from Chittagong Hills where it was deployed after the fall of Dacca to flush out Mizo insurgents. The narrative of then young officer is told in the backdrop of operations of 311 Mountain Brigade that was tasked to capture Akhaura, an important road, rail and water communications centre close to the International Border opposite Agartala. The task of 4 GUARDS was to infiltrate through enemy lines and occupy a position behind the main defences astride Brahmanbaria – Akhaura railway line. Akhaura was cleared by 05 Dec and thereafter the Battalion fought at Asuganj and Narsingdi on its way to Dacca.*

### **Prologue**

**T**he idea of death can be very scary for most of us. The normal perception about army, war and death is that they are synonymous. However it is far from the truth. The statistical data of Second World War has revealed that 17,000 bullets were needed for causing one fatal injury. You have to assume and believe that NO bullet has been manufactured in an enemy ordnance factory which has your name written on it. This is exactly what was told to us by our 'CO Saheb' Lieutenant Colonel Himmeth Singh in his durbar, one day before we were to be launched into East Pakistan.

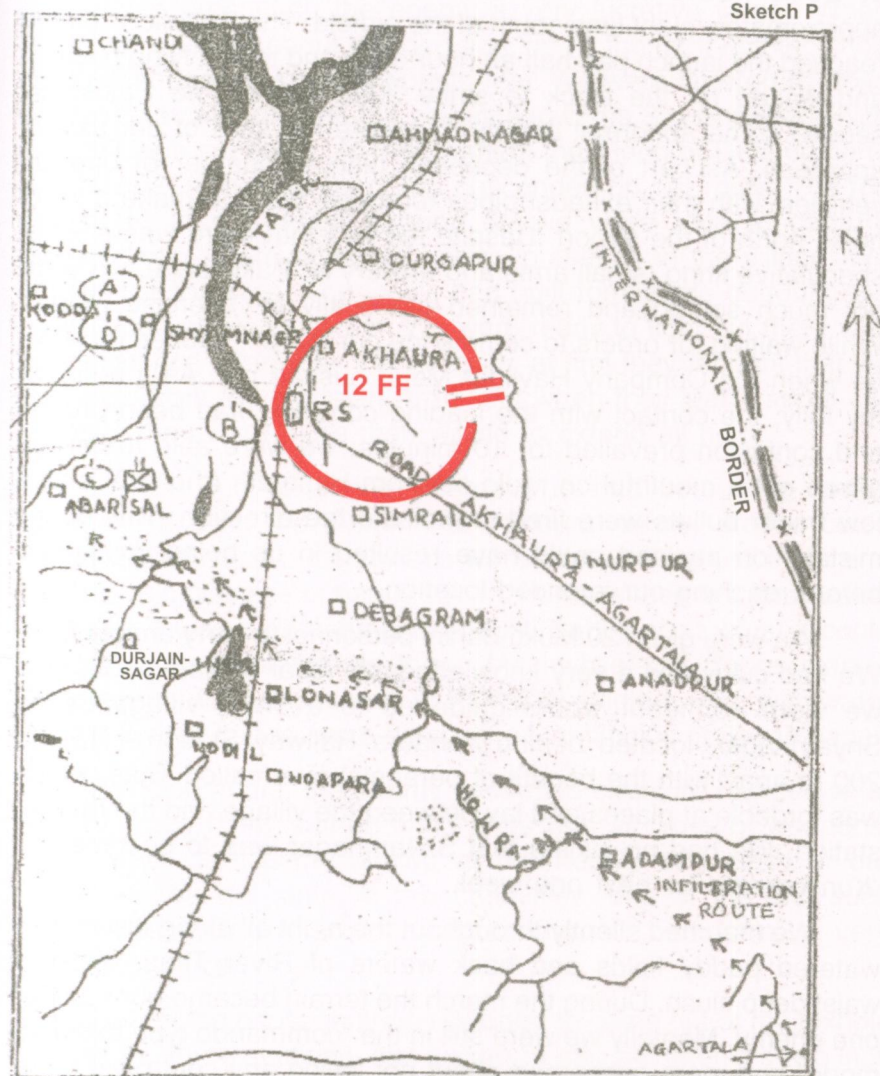
### **The Narrative**

Please refer to **Sketch P**. We left our location Litchi Bagan at Agartala (property owned by erstwhile Maharaja of Tripura) and

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## Akhaura

Sketch P



NOT TO SCALE

Source : 4 GUARDS Regimental History Records



crossed the Battalion Start Point (SP) at 1730 hours on 1 Dec 1971. We were to be launched across the International Border (IB) at 2000 hours from the launch pad, which was located approximately eight kms south of the airfield. The Battalion column reached the launch pad half an hour early and took a lying position and waited for the clock to strike 2000 hours. The Pakistanis sensed some abnormal activity, but were not sure of our axis of approach. As part of the deception plan, a number of one-ton vehicles, with their exhaust pipes removed, were to make a lot of noise north of the airport. Despite the fact that there was a lot of speculative firing (small arms and artillery by Pakistanis), we were not much scared and remained practically in "exercise mode". While waiting for orders to commence our march, I dozed off. I got up when the Company Havildar Major pushed me. As a result of my folly, the contact with the leading company had been broken and confusion prevailed for 10 minutes; we were able to link up after I got a mouthful on radio set from Himmeth (the CO) and a few tracer bullets were fired to indicate the direction. This costly mistake on my part could have resulted in us being daylighted before reaching our intended location.

We were given 20 Mukti Bahini personnel to carry ammunition. We had cultivated a very knowledgeable local civilian guide, who we were confident would guide us to a small village called Shyamnagar, located behind Akhaura Railway Station – 150 to 200 m apart with the benefit of perennial river called Titas, which was fordable at places and lay between the village and the railway station. We had no inkling that Shyamnagar was to become our '*Kurukshetra*' for next one week.

We marched silently throughout the night all along the deeply watered paddy fields and back waters of River Titas, often in waist deep slush. During the march the terrain became our number one enemy. Mentally we were still in the "commando type exercise mode" and more concerned about not losing any controlled store like compass, binocular, carbine magazine (which I did loose in the slush).

Our company got detached from the main column after crossing the slush area at a village called Barisal. We were now to march northeast (towards India) for about 3-4 km – the time was approximately 0500 hours. We were running behind time and extremely tired. We reached an open patch and were already

daylighted. Major Kharbanda (the company commander) in his wisdom decided to dig in at this open location and we soon began digging our foxholes. His reasoning was that any further advance may mean presenting the enemy a very lucrative target. When Himmeth was told about this decision, he hit the roof; nothing short of Shyamnagar was acceptable to him. We were ordered to close our foxholes and resume our advance towards Shyamnagar which was still one km away. At this moment the 'Hand of God' came to our rescue. A thick cloud of fog descended on our route. The fog remained in our direct support till we were able to capture Shyamnagar, there being no enemy presence in the village. We dug in our foxholes. The locals had built formidable dugouts and were found nicely tucked in. We were ready to fight but there was no resistance offered by the villagers; at first they thought that we too were from the Pakistan Army, but when they learnt about our identity, they were more than willing to extend all help.

As the sun rose, the enemy who had built very strong defences around the platform of Akhaura railway station could hardly believe that Indian troops were deployed behind them and that too at a distance of barely 150 m. Perhaps their first impression was that it was a detachment of Mukti Bahini or at worst it could be an isolated commando force. Meanwhile, our troops started shooting at those unsuspecting Pakistani soldiers who, with water bottles in their hands, were defecating in the fields of Shyamnagar.

By 1000 hours, the enemy command structure realised what had hit them. They started firing at us with all types of weapons. They were particularly aiming at the freshly dug earth of our foxholes. We did suffer a few casualties; one of the first such casualties was our artillery officer Captain Sundram, a very intelligent officer.

During the pause in firing I decided to come out of my foxhole to visit my three sections. Not known to me, the enemy's two inch mortar gunner was perhaps keeping a track of my movements. Hiding behind the embankment of railway line, he aimed and fired at me. The round burst approximately two metres away from me and I could see its impact. There was not sufficient time to take cover and I got splinters in my left thigh and left hand. I could observe the Pakistani gunner reloading; I therefore crawled to the culvert in the stairs of a brick house and threw my body in the



culvert. However, both my feet remained exposed. After a gap of a few minutes another two inch mortar bomb landed near the culvert. Since my body was inside the culvert I escaped any major injury but a splinter went into my left heel. After a lull in firing, all the three wounds on my body were dressed with First Aid kit in my haversack.

By 1100 hours, although I had escaped many bullets, I became a 'walking wounded soldier' due to injuries caused by splinters from two separate mortar rounds. Indeed, I realised it is difficult to die. However, we were only in the first four hours of the war; what followed for next four days and nights has perhaps few parallels. The enemy by now had decided that enough was enough and decided to teach us a lesson; intense fire was brought upon us which included small arms, medium machine guns, mortar, artillery, tank and air. We were so close to the enemy that even an error of 100 m in ranging or a slight error in plotting observer target (OT) bearing could bring own artillery fire on us. The most fearsome were the enemy tanks firing at us. Despite sighting their tanks we were reluctant to fire our rocket launcher at them because of expected retaliation. Intensity of fire could be judged from the fact that none amongst the injured (total 16) were keen to be evacuated, although we had a detachment of stretcher bearers with us. All of us were convinced that the evacuation party would be wiped out in no time. The best option was to remain tucked in the foxhole. While the injured could reason it out and give themselves a chance to survive, some of those who had died on the first or the second day had to be buried in the very foxholes in which they had lost their lives because their bodies began to decompose. Captain Sundram's dead body was one of them.

There were many incidents during this period which brought me close to death and some are still fresh in my memory. I am describing a few of these:-

(a) During infiltration when we were negotiating waist deep slush, I lost the magazine of my carbine. Even after reaching Shyamnagar the feeling of being in war had not sunk in. My company commander, Major Kharbanda, for fear of court of inquiry pertaining to loss of a Controlled Store (to which was attached a bit of loss of face) wanted the loss to be made up. He asked me to take a section strength, attack an isolated

enemy position to bring back at least one magazine of a carbine. The section led by me had gone only about 50 m and we were still under voice control when the company commander called me back because the enemy fire was so intense that he soon realised that for an item of Controlled Store he was about to lose a section including his second in command.

(b) In order to confirm our identity, the Pakistanis rounded up a group of four civilians and pushed them towards our side, perhaps under threat of shooting them if they did not do so. The civilians were under our observation from the word go: our first instinct was to shoot them but we were held back by Major Kharbanda (an ex-Police Officer) who reasoned that since they (the civilians) were unarmed they may be more useful to us as informants. As soon as they came near our defended locality, they were apprehended, blindfolded and taken to a shelter for interrogation. Needless to say, these hapless Bengalis were more than willing to cooperate and work for us.

(c) On the fourth day, the Pakistanis realised that they needed to sort us out. At about 1500 hours, they brought on us very heavy fire including tank fire and were observed forming up behind the embankment of the railway line as if for an attack. Our Senior JCO, Subedar Rawat (who had been severely wounded, and was being attended to by his sahayak) told his sahayak to leave him alone, go out and kill the Pakistanis; and if they were still likely to capture our position, then he should come back and shoot him dead. He did not wish to be captured alive. I also got highly motivated and gave similar instructions to my sahayak, Laksman. As soon as he left me, he got a splinter in his eye and lost an eye forever.

Perhaps due to our effective fire and pressure from other directions, the intended enemy attack was dissipated in the 'forming up place' itself. There was perceptible reduction in the intensity of enemy fire and it appeared that they were likely to abandon Akhaura and move towards Brahmanbaria along the railway line.

During these four days and nights, our company was in contact with no one. There was no possibility of receiving any

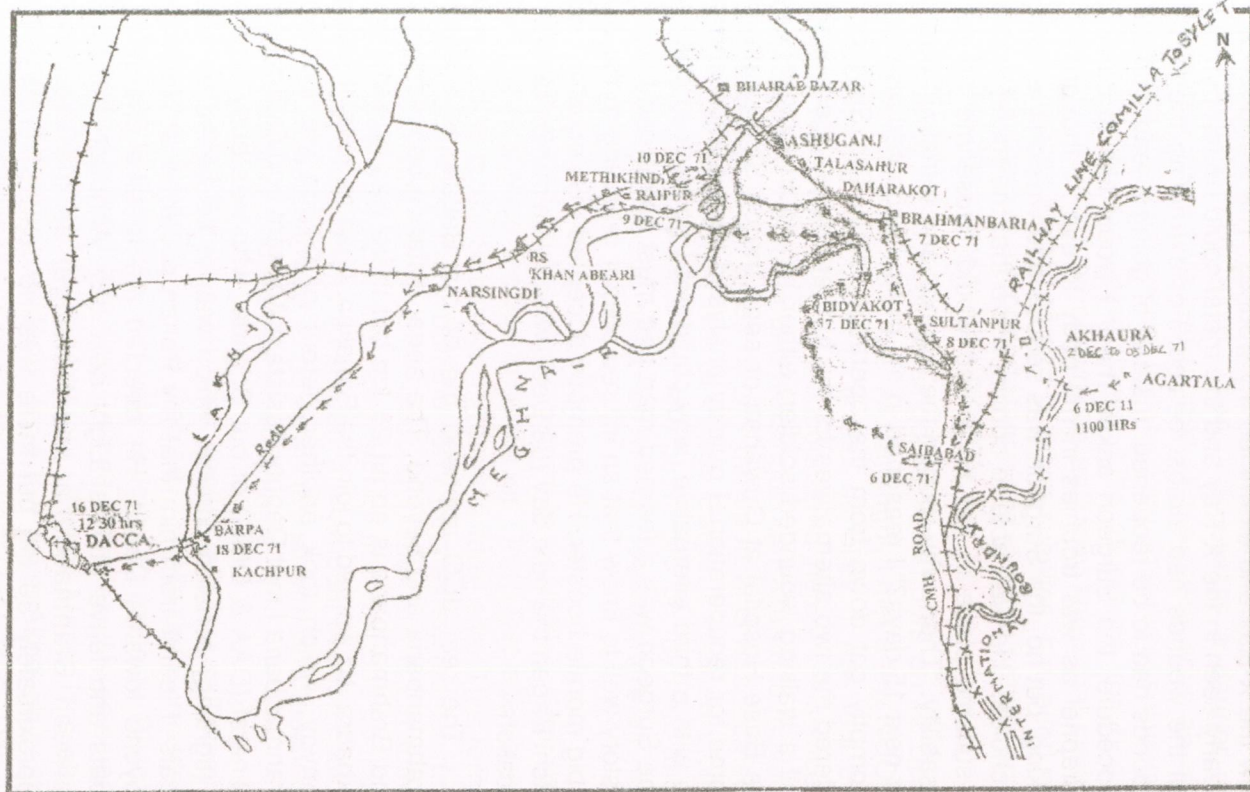


ammunition or food. We had to conserve our ammunition; out of 20 Mukti Bahini who were with us to carry ammunition, only six could make it to Shyamnagar, others disappeared. We survived on limited quantity of '*shakarparas*', 25 per cent of which had got wet while wading through the water of Titas River. The first to reach our location was the CO's party at around 0700 hours on 05 Dec. This party while approaching our location came under very heavy enemy fire and Himmeth's radio operator Lance Naik Nahar Singh's hand was badly injured. We were told that Himmeth escaped very narrowly. It was evident to me that the encounter was nerve shattering for Himmeth. As soon as I welcomed him, he asked for a cigarette, although he had left smoking a long time ago. While Major Kharbanda was busy briefing the CO (who expressed his regrets for not having been able to visit earlier), I did a smart act: I called one of the civilian prisoners and asked him to go to Akhaura and get a few chicken. This Bengali wasted no time in doing the needful. The chicken was hurriedly cooked on a make shift *chullah* (oven) and served to the CO's party. This incident remained in the memory of Himmeth who often talked about it and linked it with the 'high morale' of his troops. He also acknowledged my initiative and graciously mentioned it in my annual confidential report: "Will make a very good Regimental Officer". The war may not always bring you death but it can, sometimes, get you laurels.

Please refer to **Sketch Q**. On 05 Dec 1971, Akhaura Sector was totally liberated. Brigadier Mishra, our Commander, reached our location around 1600 hours. The CO and the Brigade Commander laid out the map on ground and started discussing about further action. Both agreed that such an opportunity came seldom in life and they must press on regardless. Consequently, I was asked to take charge of all the dead and the wounded; to take the wounded to the nearest Advance Dressing Station (ADS) and the dead to Litchi Bagan. While the Company moved towards Brahmanbaria at Last Light, we had to spend another night at Shyamnagar and could move only on 06 Dec, early morning. The Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) who attended on me in the ADS was Captain Vinay Kumar (later, he served as a RMO in our Paltan at Bangalore). By now my wounds had healed but the shrapnel were still in my body at three places. The doctor dressed the wounds and evacuated me to Field Hospital at Telliamera on Road Dharamnagar-Agartala, approximately 50 km away.

AGARTALA TO DACCA

Sketch Q



NOT TO SCALE

Difficult To Die



On 07 Dec, I was taken to the operation table. The Surgeon saw the X-Ray and examined my wounds. The shrapnel could be clearly seen in the X-Ray and the metal could be felt by touching, but the wounds had almost healed. For extracting the metal, the wounds had to be reopened. Instead of going ahead with surgical procedure, the Surgeon asked me if I would like to carry these shrapnel as war trophies in my body forever. I thought he was joking, but no, the Surgeon was serious and was only offering me a choice. He was able to convince me that the metal would find a suitable place in the body and would cause me no pain or disability. "Then, why reopen the wounds and remain in bandages for next 15 days?" I reasoned in my mind. I accepted his offer and promptly got down from the operation table. The Surgeon next offered me two alternatives for my further disposal because I was still a walking wounded soldier; either he would evacuate me to the Base Hospital at Guwahati or send me on Sick Leave to my home for recuperation. I quickly analysed the situation and came up with a third alternative, why could not I go back to my Paltan. The Surgeon was a learned man and must have read his military history well to know that an injured soldier returning to the front is a big morale booster. He promptly accepted my request. I was at Litchi Bagan the next day (08 Dec), which was our Battalion's rear location.

The rear JCO apprised me of our Battalion's advance to Brahmanbaria and beyond. The aerial distance between Agartala and Brahmanbaria is about 25 km but there was no road beyond Akhaura. If I wanted to join the Battalion, I had to go by the Brigade convoy, which took another detour of 90 km via Comilla. At Brahmanbaria I met Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General (DAA & QMG) of our Brigade, who was busy organising F (fighting) echelon convoy, which was to be based on country boats. I learnt from him that my Paltan could be at Narsingdi or beyond towards Dacca. He directed me to take charge of the boats and leave at First Light next day. Although the distance between Brahmanbaria and Narsingdi as the crow flies is approximately 30 km but there was no road which was intact. Therefore, this innovative method of transportation was resorted to in order to send supplies to troops in contact. These country boats were propelled by human effort. With a long rope tied to the boat and pulled by 2-3 men moving along the banks and another

person in the boat ensuring that it did not hit the shallow water or a stone or jetty, with the help of a big pole. The journey period was to be approximately 48 hours. There was always a danger of enemy action enroute. We had to take all the precautions as we normally do for surface convoys. It was a very adventurous voyage with interludes like song and dance. Like all others, the boat-pullers were also very fond of drinking and they knew that some quantity of rum was loaded as part of ration supplies. It needed all my tact to keep them at a proper distance and in good humour and yet ensure that the convoy kept moving.

We reached the port of Narsingdi at 1000 hours on 12 Dec after sailing non-stop for 48 hours. At Narsingdi, I met a few NCOs of our Paltan, who had come to collect supplies. I was told by them that at Narsingdi they had encountered heavy resistance. After clearing-up the area around Narsingdi our Paltan had moved on towards Dacca in all types of civil transport and was located 12 km short of Satlakhya River at village Barpa. I rejoined them at this location. On my rejoining, with bandages on my heel and hand, Himmeth decided to keep me in the Headquarters as his Intelligence Officer (IO).

Here we waited for the bigger picture to crystallise. After 48 hours lull, General Niazi decided to surrender. On 15 Dec afternoon, we were told to cross Satlakhya River at a ferry site. This ferry could carry about 80 men, but the ferry personnel had all run away. So, who was to pilot it? Second Lieutenant KS Yadav volunteered smilingly, but the ferry would not respond to his commands and broke down mid-stream; any amount of effort could not re-boot it. It was allowed to go down the stream and touched the far bank approx 100 metres downstream.

After crossing the river, we took shelter in a jute mill which was just across. Next day i.e. 16 Dec 1971, while the Surrender Ceremony was in progress, we were ordered to move to Dacca Cantonment and occupy Adamjee College Complex. We selected a bungalow opposite the College as our Officers' Mess. This was to remain our temporary residence for a few days. Although each day spent in Dacca was an experience worth recording, I shall describe only a few episodes.

In view of our impending deployment for internal security duties in Dacca City, I along with Second Lieutenant Waryam had



gone for reconnaissance on 17 Dec. While walking in a narrow street, we were the object of curiosity and silent admiration. An individual approached us and requested us to come inside his house. He said that his old mother was very keen to meet the Indian Army officers. We were a bit apprehensive but agreed to oblige him. When we walked in and he introduced us to his mother (approximately 70 years old), the woman was overjoyed and she hugged us like our own mother would have. She said that she would like to worship us because we were their liberators. They insisted on serving a cup of tea and snacks and bade us farewell very apologetically with a gift of a new packet of 7'O'Clock blades.

While walking through the by-lanes of Dacca City, we learnt that in the compound of Central Bank of East Pakistan, a lot of fire and smoke was observed on 16 Dec. We decided to investigate and what we saw was unbelievable – a 20'x20'x10' high heap of burnt Pakistani currency notes of various denominations. We lifted the ashes of burnt currency in our hands which was still warm. The bonfire was lit a day earlier while the Surrender Ceremony was in progress.

Our unit was selected for the Farewell Parade after which the Indian Army was to withdraw totally from Bangladesh. We were all happy about returning to India, but someone's idea to search and destroy Mizo insurgents in Chittagong Hills, ruined our dreams. We were now placed under command of another brigade and from Liberation Army we turned into an Expeditionary Force with all the consequent benefits of a foreign posting. From Dacca we moved by road to Chittagong and then heli-lifted to interior areas of hills bordering India. We landed by rappelling, cutting the jungle, making helipads and establishing company pickets. We were in thick jungle, with no signs of civilisation for miles around. We came across a few Chakma people who were still in the Stone Age. They were naked and totally forest dependent for all their needs. They had no idea about Mizo Insurgents or their camps. Our regular patrolling and limited intelligence network could not obtain a single lead about Mizos. It was a wild goose chase. Eventually we handed our posts to Bangladesh Rifles after jungle bashing for nearly two months.

At last we were heading home and I had the honour of leading the last convoy of Indian Army from Bangladesh on 10 June 72.