



By **LT GEN. DEEPENDRA SINGH HOODA (RETD)**

Former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Northern Command

GUTS AND GLORY

Two months after Independence, the Indian military was engaged in the first of the many wars and conflicts it would fight to safeguard the country's national security. I have looked at battles that were won and contributed significantly to influencing the post-war geostrategic landscape and the shaping of India's frontiers. The emphasis on India's frontiers is essential, as most of the wars have been a result of disputed borders. Some notable omissions could strike readers. The 1962 war was not considered because the focus was on battles that India won. The Haji Pir battle of the 1965 war was a strong contender, but missed out as the territory gained was returned after the war.



BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Battle of Shalateng

(1947-48 war)

On October 22, 1947, Pashtun tribal militia crossed the boundary of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and advanced rapidly along the Jhelum valley. Unable to stop the raiders, Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession, and the first unit of the Indian Army was airlifted to Srinagar on October 27. The gallant efforts of Lieutenant Colonel Ranjit Rai of 1 Sikh and Major Somnath Sharma of 4 Kumaon helped prevent the raiders from

capturing the Srinagar airfield, which was vital for the build-up of Indian troops. On November 7, the Indian Army mounted its first offensive at Shalateng, about 15 km west of Srinagar. In a classic enveloping attack with infantry and armoured cars, supported by effective strafing by the Indian Air Force, the raiders were completely routed. They fled, with the Indian Army in pursuit. Within a week, areas up to Uri had been recaptured. The Kashmir valley was firmly in India's control.

Defence of Poonch

(1947-48 war)

After the capture of Uri, two battalions under Lt Col. (later promoted to Brigadier) Pritam Singh fought their way into Poonch town, which was surrounded by the raiders. For one year, supported by locals, they held out against all odds. The IAF played an invaluable role in establishing an air bridge, flying in supplies, guns and ammunition. Brigadier Pritam not only defended the town but also ensured that the civil population of approximately 45,000 was supported and fed. The strong bonds established between the army and the civilians during this period endure even today.



Operation Bison: Tanks at Zoji la

(1947-48 war)

By August 1948, the situation in Ladakh was extremely precarious. Skardu garrison had fallen, and Leh was besieged. The route to Leh from Srinagar

was cut off, with Pakistani troops occupying the 11,600 ft high Zoji La, Kargil, and Dras. The first attack on Zoji La, launched by 77 Para Brigade in September 1948, failed

to dislodge the defenders. With winter approaching, the situation was critical, and it was decided to launch an audacious attack, employing Stuart tanks that were secretly moved from Jammu. After improving the track to Zoji La, the combined attack of infantry, tanks, and armoured cars was launched on November 1 amidst falling snow. The assault completely surprised the Pakistanis, and Zoji La fell in a few hours. This success paved the way for the capture of Dras and Kargil, and the Pakistanis retreated to Skardu. The route to Leh was open.

These three battles define the current geographies of the Kashmir, Jammu, and Ladakh regions. It is not difficult to imagine India's almost insurmountable geostrategic challenges if Poonch, parts of the Kashmir valley, or Leh were in Pakistani control today.

Bombing of the Governor's House

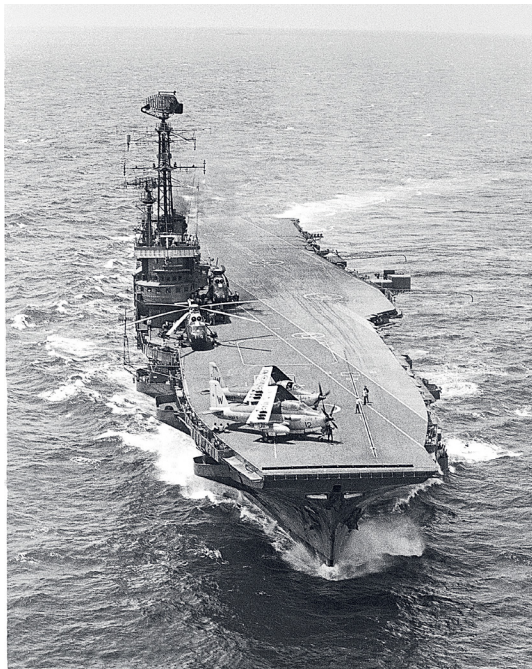
(1971 Indo-Pak war)



The 1971 war was the Indian military's finest hour, liberating Bangladesh in two weeks and taking 93,000 Pakistani soldiers and prisoners. According to the official history of the 1971 India-Pakistan War, the task allotted to Eastern Command was to "destroy the bulk of the Pakistan forces in the Eastern Theatre and occupy the major portion of East Pakistan, including the entry ports of Chittagong and Chalna-Khulna". Dhaka was not mentioned as a military objective as it was considered beyond the Eastern Command's capability. By December

9, 4 Corps had secured the eastern bank of Meghna and completed the task allotted to it. However, Lt Gen. Sagat Singh, the Corps Commander, ordered a heli-lift of troops across the Meghna. Between December 9 and 11, the IAF airlifted the entire 311 Brigade, flying more than 110 sorties and landing them barely 60 km from Dhaka. On December 14, Indian artillery fired its first salvo into the heart of Dhaka. Combined with the crossing of Meghna, the Tangail airdrop completely dislocated the defence of Dhaka. 2 Para, airdropped north of Tangail, captured the Poongli bridge

and cut off Pakistan's 93 Infantry Brigade that was rushing south to reinforce Dhaka. In considerable measure, the Meghna heli-lift and the Tangail airdrop created the conditions for the complete surrender of the Pakistan Army in East Bengal. The final blow was struck by four MiG 21s and four Hunters on December 14, which attacked the Dhaka Governor's House with rockets, ripping the massive roof off the main hall. The East Pakistan Governor, Dr A.M. Malik was so rattled after the incident that he resigned with a "shaking ballpoint pen", hastening the surrender.



BHAWAN SINGH

Naval Blockade of East Pakistan

(1971 Indo-Pak war)

At the start of the war, the Indian Navy established an effective blockade of East Pakistan, trapping Pakistan's naval assets in their ports. On December 3, Pakistani submarine PNS *Ghazi* was sunk while attempting to lay mines off the Visakhapatnam coast. From December 4, Seahawk and Alize aircraft from India's aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant* carried out devastating attacks on Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Chalna and Khulna. On December 12, The Fleet Commander reported to the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command: "There is no merchant ship...in Chittagong harbour and approaches which has not been struck and incapacitated." The successful blockade, destruction of ports, and prevention of any escape from East Pakistan contributed significantly to the final outcome of the war. Although India's borders remained unchanged after the war, the birth of Bangladesh created a completely different strategic geography for India and its security calculus.

Operation Meghdoot, 1984

On April 13, 1984, Captain Sanjay Kulkarni and 28 soldiers of 4 Kumaon were heli-landed at Bilafond La on the Saltoro range. Three days later, another group of Ladakh Scouts landed at Sia La. Thus began India's physical occupation of what is commonly called the Siachen sector. In life-threatening conditions and at an enormous human cost, the Indian Army has continued to hold this area.

There are divergent views on the strategic importance of Siachen. Many dismiss the idea of large-scale operations in this area as far-fetched, while others point out that any direct military collusion between China and Pakistan can occur only in this sector. Whatever the merits of these arguments, it is evident that Siachen presents an indomitable frontier of India's territorial control.



Operations in Partapur Sector

(1971 Indo-Pak War)

These operations took place along the Shyok river at heights of more than 18,000 ft. with a total force of three Ladakh Scout companies supported by 500 hastily raised local militia called Nubra Guards. The Indian attack was led by Major Chewang Rinchen (top), who had earlier earned an MVC in the 1947 war and a Sena Medal in the 1962 war. Starting on December 8, this force advanced 22 km up to Thang village, including the capture of Point 18402, the highest post ever captured till then. At a cost of three wounded by enemy action and 45 casualties due to frostbite, Maj. Rinchen had liberated 800 sq. km from PoK (the largest area captured in the '71 operations). The strategic value of this was realised after the Indian Army occupied the Saltoro Range overlooking the Siachen Glacier in 1984. The areas captured in 1971 provided a secure southern flank that strengthened India's defensive positions along the Saltoro.



PRAMOD PUSHKARNA

Battle of Tololing

Kargil War, 1999

On May 3, 1999, a local shepherd reported the presence of Pakistani soldiers who had infiltrated the Kargil sector. Over the next week, multiple intrusions were reported across the sector—Pakistan had established around 130 posts across the LoC. The Pakistani aim was to cut off National Highway 1A that passes over Zoji La to Leh, hoping it would pressurise India to vacate the Siachen Glacier. Dominating NH1A at Dras is the 16,000 feet high Tololing feature from where Pakistani soldiers could interdict all movement. The battle for Tololing commenced on May 23 and, over the next 20 days, there was an intense fight, often at a distance of a few metres, as 18 Grenadiers attempted to dislodge the enemy from their entrenched positions. Tololing was captured on June 13. This first decisive victory proved to be the turning point of the Kargil War.

