

# Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives

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A G BEWOOR

## Introduction

44 Squadron was reequipped with IL-76 in March 1985 under the command of Air Marshal Ashok K Goel, then a Group Captain. The squadron had inducted the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) into Sri Lanka, flown surgical cabins from Pune to Leh, inducted BMPs and fuel bowsers into Thoise, changed the complexion of the Assam Courier, and created a situation where Leh or Thoise had '*no back load*'. I took over command of 44 Squadron in September 1987 in Agra.

## Activation and Preliminaries

On November 03, 1988, at 0715, hrs I got orders to place three aircraft on '*Stand By Three Hours*'. Jadhav, Ramu, Ahuja, Vishu, Dilbagh, Patankar, Bhatnagar, all key personnel of 44 Squadron, activated our time-tested systems, and by 1000 hrs, we were ready. On TV, we heard about a coup in Maldives, and that India was going to help President Gayoom; this prompted our navigators to enter way points from Agra to Hulule via Trivandrum into the computers of the aircraft. Hulule is the island that had the primary runway of Maldives of about 7,600 ft in November 1988. It is nearly 10,000 ft today. Discussions were held and we made general plans for Hulule while the squadron cafeteria was working overtime as anticipated operational tasks activate gastric juices. By 1100 hrs, we were raised to One Hour Status but still had no *pucca* orders and had no idea of our cargo after four hours of Stand By.

Unknown to us, 50 Parachute Brigade was activated. The task was given to 6 Para, commanded by then Colonel Subhash Joshi who was going on leave to Gangtok. Joshi actually went 180 degrees opposite and later declared that taking a lift with Bewoor has “the possibility of heading the other way”. No joint orders and instructions for coordination between 44 Squadron and the Para Brigade were issued. Inputs to the brigade said that approximately 200 terrorists with rocket propelled grenades and AK- 47s, controlled the TV and telephone centres and important installations. Mercifully, they had ignored the island of Hulule, with the runway – the other runway on the island of Gaan about 400 km to the south, was irrelevant. Reports said that the terrorists may have Surface-to-Air-Missiles (SAMs) but this was not conveyed to the Indian Air Force (IAF). By 1230 hrs, with 44 Squadron still waiting firm orders, elements of the Para Brigade started pouring onto our tarmac, and by 1500 hrs, the complete brigade had mobilised. Thus, it was that by 1530 hrs, 44 Squadron and the vanguard of the Parachute Brigade were ready for action, awaiting firm instructions. It was then that officers from Army and Air Headquarters (HQ) arrived at Agra with our orders. They were then Brigadier VP Malik and Group Captain Ashok Goel. Readers must note the absence of a single coordinating authority; in fact, there never was an overall force commander / coordinator though we had one for the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) since July 1987, more than 16 months before this date.

**There were no joint orders or instructions between the Army and Air Force.**

### **Should We Drop or Land?**

The team from New Delhi included Mr Banerjee, our High Commissioner, who gave a tourist book with photographs of the runway, Mr Gayoom and the island of Male. Do we attempt a paradrop or go for a direct landing at Hulule? Was there space to receive the paratroopers? Mr Banerjee’s knowledge of the geography of the islands, the obstacles and location of important installations was crucial to the paratroopers. Time was ticking away, it was 1600 hrs, and we had to make up our minds quickly. The island of Hulule with the main runway was still ignored by the terrorists, how much longer would they neglect it? Which group of terrorists were we up against? Were they from Africa, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Southeast (SE) Asia or the subcontinent? It was, therefore, not possible to make plans based on ‘known enemy capabilities and style of operations’. No intelligence? It was now nine hours since activation.

**Where to Drop?** The open spaces on Male were too small for a drop. An IL-76 drops 126 paratroopers in four streams in 22 seconds, but the Dropping Zone (DZ) must be large enough. The option of dropping 10 at a time was ridiculous and would give the game away, besides, the 200 odd terrorists would have overwhelmed them. Making a drop on the runway had many imponderables. Winds at Hulule are westerly, around 20 km, it being just north of the Equator. To land on the runway, the aircraft would have to fly about 3 km west of Hulule, and then hope that the troopers would drift exactly that distance in the expected winds and land on the runway. If they landed in the water, it would be disastrous as most would drown with their heavy load and the shallow, sharp coral would injure them severely. To top it all, we were confronted with a paradrop at night, with unknown winds, scanty details about obstacles and enemy capabilities. This was a challenge for 44 Squadron and the Para Brigade, with complete absence of any significant intelligence.

**Can We Attempt a Landing?** The runway was reportedly safe but whether the troops there could repel the terrorists was unknown. However, we decided that the best option was to try a landing at Hulule. Normally, IL-76s have fuel to reposition themselves anywhere in India. Now the flight was from Agra at Hulule, they had to be on the ground with engines running to disgorge the paratroopers, and then return to Trivandrum with Bangalore as the primary diversion. The three IL-76s needed 70,000 litres of Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF). The squadron tarmac resembled a beehive-cum-anthill – we missed out some things, shortcuts were taken, and there was a mix up about the lead aircraft. Miraculously, our Chief Engineering Officer, then Group Captain, now Air Marshal Gururani (Retd) got all three aircraft refuelled with 70,000 litres by 1745 hrs and achieved something unprecedented in the history of the IAF. Thus, K-2878 and K-2999 were starting engines at 1750 hrs for a take-off that was recorded by Air Traffic Control (ATC), Agra, as 1804 hrs on November 03, 1988.

## **Discussions and Making of Plans**

**Rapid Mobilisation:** There was no time for discussions between the brigade and 44 Squadron, preoccupied as we were in briefing our own forces. The only source of information was the tourist book and it was not published for planning an airborne assault. So all discussions were on board the K-2878, somewhere between Bhopal and Hyderabad, at 25,000 ft. We discussed the landing, what would happen thereafter, how the rescue teams would deploy. We were now nearing Nagpur, and it was time for a well earned dinner prepared by Govind, the

superb cook of 44 Squadron. Back at Agra, the squadron and the brigade were preparing the next three aircraft for Maldives. The rapidity and professionalism with which the Indian armed forces reacted surprised many foreign governments and their military establishments. Could it have been done smarter and faster? Would joint instructions and an overall coordinator at Agra have helped? Could we have got airborne earlier? These issues need to be pondered upon.

**Just One IL-76:** Our next problem was: what to tell ATC? Officially, there was just my aircraft on a routine flight from Agra to Trivandrum. The second IL-76, with Wing Commander AS Gill as captain, kept one km behind us, without navigation lights, and silent. As an aside, the author salutes the professionalism and courage of the young pilots from 7 Squadron who flew their Mirages from Gwalior to Trivandrum at night through very rough weather. For a single seat-single engine aircraft, with no assistance from ground control, it is truly creditable. A Check Point NOKID is located between Trivandrum and Male which we would cross both ways. All air traffic between Southeast Asia and the Middle East transits through NOKID. We did not report our position at NOKID, in case someone was monitoring our flight to forewarn the rebels. After crossing NOKID, it was time to establish contact with Hulule. Where was the coordination to overcome this uncertainty? Could it all have been done different? Yes. Was delegation down the line done? No.

## **The Arrival at Hulule Airport**

**The Landing:** At about 2125 hrs we made first Radio/Telephony (R/T) contact with Hulule. The code word "HUDIA" was transmitted by Hulule to confirm that the runway was safe to land. Our navigator Group Captain MK Singh, brought us in line with the runway and approximately 25 km from touchdown, we asked for runway lights: they came on for just 10 seconds and then went off. We descended unguided towards a dark, unlit runway, in the middle of the Hind Mahasagar. It was pitch black, with no moon, the exact position of the runway completely ascertain and no visual perspective to adjust our approach path. Having flown 3,000 km with 200 paratroopers from Agra across India, crossing NOKID as a ghost aircraft, I was not looking for ideal landing conditions. Making a second approach was out of the question. It had to be done the first time and done right. From the cockpit, nothing could be seen on the ground – actually it was water. Usually city lights around an airport give the pilot some reference, but here it was jet black. Apart from the standard intercommunication between the pilot / engineer / navigator, no one else spoke. The Indian armed forces with

**The Indian troops had reached Maldives within 15 hours of the incident.**

44 Squadron in the lead were about to make history in strategic intervention. Would we do it right, and do it smartly? I hoped all was well on the runway, and no surprises awaited us. At about 200 m above sea level, I transmitted “lights”. They came on, we flared out, chopped power and as the tyres touched the concrete, the runway lights were switched off. Most irregular, nor anticipated, and pretty unnerving. The K-2878 was on the ground at Hulule with 200 paratroopers – Phase I of Operation Cactus had been successfully achieved.

**Troops on my Landing Run:** Having read the story so far, the reader will understand that we were not sure how far down the runway the aircraft actually touched down. So we had to engage reverse on all four engines, and sit on the brakes. As I recollect, we stopped in the last 300 ft. There was complete silence in the aircraft. We turned around, and started opening the cargo doors for facilitating speedy exit for the paratroopers. As the aircraft stopped, the maroon berets were out like a shot. We could see them scurrying across the tarmac, totally professional rapid action forces. However, the swift action to get onto the other side of the runway had its tragic-comic consequences. I advised Gill to land after it was clear that there was no enemy response. Imagine his horror, when he saw paratroopers crossing the runway during his landing run. Amazingly, no one was even grazed by the aircraft. Talk about living dangerously! Our landing time was 2148 IST, 3 hours 44 minutes from wheels up to touchdown.

**Grenades at 30,000 Ft:** Brigade plans saw all the troops going into battle for securing Hulule. So we Air Force guys offloaded stores from the aircraft, wanting to take-off as soon as possible. There was no need to expose two giant IL-76s to some stout- hearted terrorist. During the off-loading, we found ammunition boxes opening up and belted ammunition falling all around our feet. This happened because contrary to regulations, ammunition was issued on board the K-2878. But under the circumstances, it was the only option. But there is more. Somewhere between Nagpur and Bangalore, Joshi realised that his ‘boys’ were without hand grenades. Yes readers, nearly 200 paratroopers were issued hand grenades at 30,000 ft inside the K-2878.

By 2230 hrs on November 03, 1988, I left Hulule, with Gill following. We had successfully delivered about 400 of some of the finest soldiers of the Indian Army to Hulule within 15 hours of the first telephone call received from the Maldives. That evening, 44 Squadron flew five aircraft into Hulule. Then Squadron Leader, now late Air Vice Marshal (AVM) Robin Barua and crew brought in the fifth IL-76 –

they were the only ones to see Maldives Islands by day. It is said that the Maldives are extremely beautiful. Unfortunately, the writer has not seen Male by day, nor visited it again. We came in on a moonless night, and left within 45 minutes. Gill and I reached Trivandrum by 2315 hrs, the officers from Army and Air HQ briefed the AOC-in-C, Southern Air Command, Air Marshal Gabbu Sen. I got back to Agra by 0500 hrs on November 04, to see the sixth aircraft being readied. All of us had been awake for more than 24 hours. Once again, 44 Squadron and the IAF had lived up to their reputation. I very humbly place on record that I was privileged to command such a fine body of officers and airmen. They did a fine job and do so even today.

### **Progress of Ground Operations**

Joe got into the act immediately. By 2220 hrs, he had secured the island of Hulule. He then set about commandeering boats to move to the island of Male. During the crossing, they saw a large ship moving in the harbour and fired four rockets all of which hit their target. But Joe's job was to secure President Gayoom and not chase ships. The beachhead was established just after midnight on November 03/04, 1988, and by 0215 hrs, President Gayoom was under the protection of 6 Para. House-to-house searches were made, and about 30 mercenaries were captured with large quantities of arms and explosives. About 60 had fled on the ship *MV Progress Light* with many hostages. Joe then called Brigadier Balsara and Mr Banerjee across to Male, and some time after 0400 hrs, they met a very relieved Mr Gayoom. After some discussions, they called New Delhi, and Mr Gayoom had a small chat with Rajiv Gandhi, our Prime Minister. The Indian Navy in a classic and surgically conducted operation on the high seas intercepted the *MV Progress Light*. The terrorists killed some hostages but surrendered to the *INS Godavari* and *Betwa*. The details of how the *Godavari* and *Betwa* carried out the interception is a story by itself, and must be told by the Navy.

### **Lessons and Conclusion**

There are innumerable lessons to be learnt from Operation Cactus. India's predominant geographic position in the Indian Ocean, the size of its economic, political, commercial, technical and industrial strength, and, of course, its military potential, place a heavy burden on it. This burden is to be borne with grace and redeemed. India may have to render support to neighbours at any time, and they will expect appropriate responses because of Operation Cactus which has not been forgotten. One lesson is to be fully prepared, both militarily

and politically, to render assistance with level headedness. The airborne assault at Hulule was not to impose our systems and culture upon another people. But if we are unprepared and unrehearsed, then forces inimical to India will be tempted to create mischief and destabilise matters to their advantage. India will pay dearly to reestablish normalcy in this region. Examples are abundant.

The air assault at Hulule was India's first undisclosed strategic intervention at the request of a neighbour. The IPKF was well advertised before the first soldier set foot on Sri Lankan soil while the 1971 intervention in Bangladesh was imminent and known to the world. We got it right in Maldives with a large dose of good luck. Indeed, good training, measured audacity, daring initiative, swift action, full backing and non-interference by the political and bureaucratic leadership contributed to the success. It is true that the world powers were awed by the rapid professional reaction of the Indian Air Force and Indian Army. It is for the reader to make comparisons with other similar operations, and then proudly conclude that most surely there is something unique and praiseworthy about the Indian armed forces.

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Gp Capt **AG Bewoor**, VM (G) was the CO of 44 Air Force Squadron during the Indian assistance operation to Maldives in 1988.