

# The Battle for Sylhet

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## Prelude

Prior to the battle for Sylhet, during the Indo-Pak War of 1971, the 4th Battalion of the 5th Gorkha Rifles had fought two battles at Atgram and Gazipur. The battle of Atgram is memorable because it was here that the last known khukri attack was launched in modern military history. It was a silent attack, launched at night, along an approach least expected by the enemy. Surprise was complete. It was also an action where the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Arun Harolika and the enemy commander fought hand-to-hand till the enemy commander was finally killed. The enemy holding Atgram was decimated. Heads rolled that moonlight night as the Gorkhas used their khukris with abandon. Those of the enemy, who ran away, possibly passed on the message to their colleagues: “Better not mess with the Gorkhas because if you do, you are likely to lose your head.’

Success in war by a unit sometimes results in that unit being used repeatedly for multiple operations. The success in Atgram resulted in the battalion being tasked to attack Gazipur where once again the battalion was successful and a very strong objective with concretised defences was captured. These two encounters with the enemy were hard fought battles that exacted a heavy toll on the battalion. The battalion had started the war with 18 officers and after these two battles, only 11 were left—three killed and four being wounded.

The Commanding Officer now asked for a few days to reorganise the command and control of the rifle companies where heavy casualties had taken place. Permission was granted and the battalion moved off to a forest, to reorganise and recuperate. The Commanding Officer had just started reorganising the rifle

companies when a message was received that the battalion was required to capture Sylhet in the Indian Army's first heliborne operation.

Permission for time to reorganise the battalion was refused by Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, the Corps Commander. Lieutenant General Sagat Singh was a man in a hurry. He wanted to be the first at Dhaka, and Sylhet was blocking his way. He had received information that Pakistan's 202 Infantry Brigade that was holding Sylhet had moved for the defence of Dhaka and he wanted a battalion to occupy Sylhet before it could be reinforced. When he was told that the battalion needed time to reorganise, he said: "There is no time to lose. I know the Gorkhas. They are most suitable for this task. Tell them to move immediately."

It was difficult to accept that Sylhet was evacuated because it was a key defensive location that was part of the defensive strategy of General AAK Niazi's '*Fortress Concept*'. Lieutenant Colonel Harollikar voiced his misgivings but he was overruled. He was informed that there were only about 200 *razakars*<sup>1</sup> holding Sylhet and that there was, therefore, nothing to worry about. In the Indian Army one can state one's reservations upto a point, but after that, orders are orders, and then one has to do one's best to achieve the laid down tasks.

The teaching at Army schools of instruction lays down that a paradropped or heliborne force needs to be reinforced within 48 hours, failing which that force would disintegrate due to casualties and lack of resources. Also, that a great deal of coordination between the Army and the Air Force would need to take place to ensure the success of such an operation.

Contrary to these teachings, the battalion was told that a helicopter for reconnaissance of the battle ground would arrive at 7:30 am the next day and that the fly-in would commence at 2:30 pm. The battalion was also assured that it would be linked-up within 48 hours. The Commanding Officer, however, was aware that the link-up within the time specified was most unlikely. He consulted his officers and men and decided to take more ammunition instead of food and water and other administrative stores. So, all we had was a handful of *shakarpara*<sup>2</sup> and our own water bottles for water. Our big packs were left behind and all we could take to protect ourselves from the winter cold were our *barsatis*.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Battle**

The helicopter to reconnoitre the landing ground arrived at the launch pad for the operation at 7:30 am the next day and the Commanding Officer and Brigade Commander flew over the projected area and the landing ground for

the fly-in of the battalion was selected from the air. Meanwhile, the officers of the battalion were thrilled that they had been selected to undertake the Indian Army's first heliborne operation and they were busy organising the rifle companies for the heliborne assault. The officers were very young but what they lacked in age was made up by their energy and the experience of the previous two battles.

There was no ground fire directed at the helicopter which seemed to confirm that Sylhet was not held. The fly-in commenced at 2:30 pm on December 7, 1971, but there were only ten MI-8 helicopters. Each of them could take only one fully armed infantry section. The choppers were soft-skinned and were meant only for administrative duties but General Sagat Singh and Group Captain Chandan Singh, his air advisor, took the risk to use them anyway. However, due to the restrictions of time and helicopter capacity, only two rifle companies and the Battalion Headquarters could be lifted on December 7.

When the first rifle company landed at Sylhet, all hell broke loose and the company was subjected to heavy artillery, mortar and medium machine gun fire. This was certainly not the opposition that we were told that we would face. Unknown to us, Pakistan's 202 Infantry Brigade had not moved out of Sylhet. Worse still, Pakistan's 313 Infantry Brigade had arrived on the evening of December 7, to reinforce Sylhet and there were also the troops of the Sylhet garrison already in location. So, we were faced with an unequal ratio of 1:16 but, fortunately at that time, we did not know this.

The fly-in continued during the night of December 7-8 and by the morning of December 8, a total of 584 all ranks had been landed at Sylhet. The enemy did their best to destroy the helicopters in the air and on the ground. The helicopters managed to get away safely, notwithstanding that all of them had bullet holes in their bodies. Soon after, the helicopters moved away from Sylhet, and the battalion was on its own. However, it had an Air Control Team (ACT) and two mountain guns and a platoon from a Guards battalion.

Night falls quickly in winter in the northeast and by 4:30 pm on the December 8, it had become dark. By this time, we had extended the perimeter of the area we had captured. Repeated counter-attacks by the enemy were repulsed. It was necessary to dominate the ground in front of us and patrols were sent and ambush parties placed as we expected the Pakistanis to do their best to destroy us that night. However, they seemed to lack the guts to get involved with us in close combat and I am of the opinion that this was because of the havoc we created at Atgram and Gazipur with our khukris.

The next day, December 9, was memorable for a number of reasons. In the morning, we could see a huge body of troops collecting for an attack to evict us from the area. They were far beyond the range of our artillery but the ACT did a great job and soon Indian Air Force (IAF) fighters from Kumbhigram were over us, pulverising the enemy and the attack was broken up. The arrival of the Air Force fighters was a great morale booster for the men and the young Gorkha soldiers clapped their hands in glee. By this time, our food and water had finished and we were getting low on ammunition.

That evening, BBC broadcast to the world that a brigade of Gorkhas had landed at Sylhet. The person broadcasting this message must have got mixed up between the terms 'battalion' and 'brigade', but it was good for us because at that time everyone was listening to BBC, as it was the most credible source of information. It imposed caution on the Pakistanis by creating a false impression that we were a brigade, whereas we were a little more than half a battalion. We decided to redeploy the battalion to simulate the disposition of a brigade.

Simulating the disposition of a brigade with the limited strength of an under-strength battalion had its own hazards. The space between the rifle companies had to be increased. This created gaps between the companies and it became difficult to interlock the arcs of fire of the light machine guns. This opened a situation where the enemy could destroy the isolated companies, one by one. It was a risk but the Commanding Officer took it. In order to offset this disadvantage we placed machine gun nests in the gaps between the companies.

By December 10, there was no assurance that the promised link-up would take place. Hunger and thirst began to be felt by the troops and ammunition was running low. We had no option but to drink water from muddy ponds within the defended area and we managed to scabble grain from abandoned huts that were scattered within our defences. Air Force fighters kept us covered during the day but at night we were on our own. Although the enemy sent patrols to probe our defences, our patrols kept them at bay.

The enemy used their artillery to shell us at night and particularly in the early hours of the morning; during the day their guns would go into hides to take cover from our fighter aircraft. In the early hours of December 11, enemy artillery destroyed our medical inspection room bunker. The badly wounded who were in the bunker were killed and all medical supplies were destroyed. We now had nothing to help those who were wounded. Our casualties began mounting and the dead and wounded were lying around without medical facilities.

The Gorkha troops were stoic and they took the situation bravely. No one complained but we realised that something had to be done to get the dead and wounded away. Requests were made for helicopter evacuation and on the night of December 12, two MI-8 helicopters arrived to take away the wounded and the dead. This was good for morale as it was not nice having so many of the dead and wounded lying around. We learned later on that the Pakistanis thought that we had been reinforced.

By December 13, small arms ammunition had got really low and the men were sharpening their khukris for the inevitable final encounter. By this time, an enemy patrol passed through one of the gaps in our defences and although we chased it away, we felt that the enemy would have come to know that we were a diminished battalion—in no way a brigade. We decided, therefore, to pull in the extended companies so that we could fight together rather than in an isolated fashion. The platoons by this time were greatly diminished in strength but they leapfrogged in a disciplined manner although one of the companies had some difficulty in breaking contact with the enemy. Fortunately, the enemy failed to follow up and we were able to reorganise our defences into a proper defensive layout. However, ammunition was a problem and we asked for ammunition to be dropped.

The next evening i.e. on December 14, a Caribou transport aircraft flew in just before last light and dropped ammunition over an improvised dropping zone. The enemy did their best to destroy the transport aircraft which was slow moving and they managed to cause some damage, but it was able to deliver its loads and get away. Unfortunately, it delivered ammunition for mortars and the two mountain guns, whereas we wanted small arms ammunition. However, as far as the enemy was concerned, they felt that we had been resupplied and that we would now be able to fight with renewed strength.

On the same evening, we learnt that our Army Chief, General Sam Manekshaw had given the Pakistan Army Commander of East Pakistan, Lieutenant General AKK Niazi, an ultimatum to surrender or face the consequences; that it would not do the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan any good, and that if they surrendered, they would be treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.

There was a lull in the fighting on the morning and afternoon of December 15, 1971. It appeared that they were digesting the message of our Army Chief. At around 4:30 pm, one of the forward Company Commanders reported that a huge number of Pakistani soldiers were advancing onto his company defended locality waving white flags. The Commanding Officer

directed the Company Commander to fire a machine gun burst close to them to stop them in their tracks. They stopped and sent two officers with a message that they wanted to surrender. We had no news whether such surrenders were happening elsewhere also, or whether this was an isolated incident. Actually, the Commanding Officer did not want them to come close as they would come to know that we were in such small strength. The messengers were told that we had no orders to accept their surrender and that we would continue the fight. They then asked whether they could speak with the Brigade Commander. We now realised that we had managed to bluff them that we were a brigade. We told them that this was the order of the Brigade Commander. However, if they insisted on surrendering, they could come the next day at the same place and time by which time we would clarify the situation with our higher headquarters.

We informed our Brigade Commander of the developments on our front and asked him to come the next day to accept the surrender of the Sylhet garrison. The next day, December 16, 1971, the Pakistanis dutifully assembled at the time and place as stipulated by us and the Brigade Commander arrived by helicopter at our location and was escorted to the place where the Pakistanis were waiting—some distance from our defences.

When the commanders met, they asked our Brigade Commander as to who had come in the helicopter and the conversation ran something like this:

*“Salam Walekum”.*

*“Walekum Salaam”.*

“Janab, who has come in this helicopter?”

“I have. Why do you ask?”

“But you are the Brigade Commander!”

“That’s right”.

“Then were you not here?”

“That’s right. I was a hundred miles away”.

“Then what was here?”

“A battalion. In fact, it is just half a battalion!”

There was now a great murmuring among the assembly who could not believe what they were hearing; that it was such a small body of soldiers that had held them at bay for nine days and nights. However, we too were in for a surprise when three Brigadiers, two Colonels, 173 officers, 290 Junior Commissioned Officer’s (JCOs) and over 8,000 troops surrendered to us. By this time, our strength had dwindled to seven officers and 532 Other Ranks (ORs) as one more officer had

been killed during the landing. The ability of a battalion to hold a division size force for nine days and nights contributed effectively to the overall success of the Indian Army in East Pakistan as this force was not available for the defence of Dhaka.

General Jacob the Chief of Staff of Headquarters Eastern Command has this to say about the battle for Sylhet in his book *Surrender at Dhaka*:

On 7 December, 4/5 Gorkha Rifles of 59 Mountain Brigade had been lifted by helicopters to the South-East of Sylhet across the Surma River. The Pakistanis had evacuated the civil population from Sylhet and fortified the town. The defences were held by the Pakistani 202 Infantry Brigade. Pakistani 313 Infantry Brigade ex Maulvi Bazar joined the Sylhet Garrison bringing the strength up to six battalions, one regiment of 105 mm guns and one battery of 120 mm mortars. The move of Pakistani 313 Brigade from Maulvi Bazar to Sylhet had not been anticipated by us at Command Headquarters and came as a surprise. We had expected this brigade would fall back to the Coronation Bridge on the Meghna for the defence of the Meghna crossing and Dhaka. Had they done so, IV Corps' progress across the Meghna would have been very difficult. When we got radio intercepts confirming their move to Sylhet, we were very relieved. It meant for all practical purposes, that two infantry brigades were out on a limb at Sylhet where they could be contained and their effectiveness neutralised. After the war, whilst interrogating the GOC of the Division, Major General Abdul Quazi, I asked him why he had moved this brigade to Sylhet. He replied that he was determined that he would not let us capture Sylhet. Niazi's fortress strategy and the Division Commander's implementation of this policy speeded up the disintegration of Pakistan's defence capabilities and facilitated the capture of Dhaka.

The success of the battle of Sylhet was tempered by the loss of the many who died or were wounded in the battle. The Gorkhas lost 14 killed and 39 wounded. Those who were killed at Sylhet included one officer, two JCOs, and 11 ORs. Overall, in the three battles at Atgram, Gazipur and Sylhet, the battalion lost four officers, two JCOs and 30 ORs killed and seven officers and 123 ORs wounded. While the outstanding performance of those who captured Sylhet was recognised by the award of the battle honour 'Sylhet', one should not forget the contribution of the Indian Air Force in the success of this battle and also BBC which, by their

mistaken broadcast that a 'brigade of Gorkhas' had landed at Sylhet, contributed to the ability of the Gorkhas to pretend to be a brigade and to impose caution on the Pakistanis.

What comes to mind is the advice given to us gentlemen cadets at the Indian Military Academy by Captain Desmond Hayde, "*Battles are won or lost in the mind before they are won or lost on the ground.*" He proved this later when as a Lieutenant Colonel in command of 3 JAT, he captured Dograi in the Indo-Pak War of 1965 against overwhelming opposition. The Gorkhas proved this to be true at the battle of Sylhet.

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## Notes

1. Razakar: irregular Pakistani soldier.
2. Shakarpara: sweet biscuits made of atta, milk and sugar.
3. Barsati: Rain cape.