

# **CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)**

## **SEMINAR REPORT**

### **LIBERATION OF BANGLADESH 1971: RECOLLECTION AND REFLECTION**

**10 DECEMBER 2014**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a seminar on '***Liberation of Bangladesh: 1971 Recollection and Reflection***' at the IDSA Auditorium, New Delhi on 10 December 2014. Veterans who had participated in the war as well as noted experts gathered to go down the memory lane narrating the events that led to the creation of Bangladesh and India's greatest military victory. The seminar was held as a tribute to the martyrs of India and Bangladesh and was well attended by serving officers, veterans, and members of the strategic community as well as students from the reputed schools of the NCR and the members of the media.

#### **OVERVIEW OF THE SEMINAR**

The seminar was conducted in sessions as under: -

1. **Inaugural Session.** This included an Inaugural address by Lt Gen Philip Campose, AVSM\*\*, VSM, ADC, VCOAS, Chairman Board of Governors CLAWS, followed by the Book Release function of the Book titled '*Liberation, Bangladesh 1971 – First Hand Untold Action Stories from the War Zone*' and the recounting of the experiences of the War in 1971 by the Chief Guest, Hon'ble Governor of Arunachal Pradesh Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM. (Retd), Guest of Honour, Lt Gen JFR Jacob, PVSM (Retd) and Special Guest, Gen Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), former COAS.
2. **Special Address.** There was a Special Address by H.E Mr Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India.
3. **Special Session.** This session was conducted post tea and was chaired by Brig KP Singh Deo, AVSM, VSM, Former Rajya Raksha Mantri. This session was focused at '*Recounting the Action*' in which the brave hearts both from India and Bangladesh, who had participated in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, recounted their actual experiences of the war zone.

## **INAUGURAL SESSION**

### **Welcome Address by Lt Gen B.S Nagal, PVSM, AVSM, SM, Director CLAWS**

Welcoming a galaxy of eminent personalities, both from India and Bangladesh assembled to commemorate the 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Liberation of Bangladesh, the Director, CLAWS brought out that, in December 1971 the Indian Nation stood rock solid and proud as the Indian armed forces conducted a successful strategic campaign of maneuver warfare in a multi-dimensional role. He further stated that the campaign was based on clear cut politico- military goals and strategic planning at the highest level. The Pakistan army's surrendered on 16 December 1971 was a classic victory of the Indian armed forces and the Mukti Bahini. The war had the people of Bangladesh fight shoulder to shoulder with the Indian Defence Forces.

The Director CLAWS touched on the events that preceded the war which included:-

1. Hurricane *Bhola*, which caused immense devastation and death in Bangladesh with an estimated three to five lakh deaths followed by lack of response by the government of Pakistan.
2. The landslide victory by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in the Pakistan General Elections.
3. The crackdown by the Pakistani military in response to the mass demonstrations by people of Bangladesh in view of denial of Pakistani Government to honour the people's mandate in elections.

He further stated that the war was won as it was a **just war** for a just cause which was the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh, upholding the dignity of the human rights and against genocide. The Director, CLAWS once again welcomed the brave and valiant men who with grit, tenacity and blood made possible this great victory. He further reiterated that their narrations will indeed be very special as they will also speak for the many young men and women who fought alongside and then made their last journey without leaving their footprints on the sands of time.

**Inaugural Address by Lt Gen Philip Campose. AVSM\*\*, VSM. ADC. VCOAS. Chairman Board of Governors CLAWS**

The VCOAS after welcoming the illustrious speakers and panelists stated that War for Liberation of Bangladesh was unique in many ways. The conflict was preceded by months of careful military, diplomatic and strategic planning and discussions. He further stated that resource mobilization and force sustenance were complex issues, given the nature of terrain and the limited infrastructure. The campaign exposed the Indian armed forces to the virtues of joint planning and execution and the War remains a shining example of jointmanship and integration.

The General Officer also brought out that the quality of leadership displayed at all levels was exemplary and the conduct thoroughly professional. Innovative use of scarce resources including the much spoken air assets and out of the box solutions won the day for Indian Armed Forces in one of the shortest wars in modern times. He reiterated that the war of 1971 has always been termed as a significant geopolitical event in the Indian subcontinent since the partition of 1947 and the lessons of the war remain as relevant today as they were four decades ago.

The VCOAS stated that the seminar is the celebration of human grit and endurance against heavy odds. While the higher directions of War were being implemented in the form of maneuver battles, it was the indomitable courage of the Indian soldiers, the spirited fight of the Mukti Bahini and above all the overwhelming support of the people of Bangladesh that led to the massive defeat of an adversary that was well entrenched.

The blemish free record of Indian Army with no case of human rights violations reflects the military professionalism that separated the victor from the vanquished. The General Officer also highlighted the outstanding contribution of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force. He further stated that the bond that developed between the Indian Armed Forces and the Mukti Bahini on the battlefield over four decades back has strengthened the bond between the Armies of the two nations. Increased defence cooperation, bilateral training exercises, professional courses, sports and army to army exchanges have brought the two countries closer and helped in appreciation of each other's perspectives and challenges.

The VCOAS summed up his address by stating that as the shadow of global terrorism looms large on the subcontinent, there is greater scope to further strengthen the India- Bangladesh bilateral co-operation against common threats and challenges.

**Comments by Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch. SM. VSM. (Retd):**

Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, is the Co-Editor of the Book titled '*Liberation, Bangladesh 1971 – First Hand Untold Action Stories from the War Zone*'. He thanked each and every author of the 41 stories that formed the part of this book. Explaining the genesis of the idea of writing these stories and compiling them into a book, which he stated emanated from the discussions that took place after the conclusion of a similar seminar in year 2013, he stated that this was a humble beginning as these were only a handful of the narrations of the great victory that led to the liberation of Bangladesh. He further expressed his desire that a joint effort by the Indian and Bangladesh Governments to document all such narrations should be instituted. Dwelling further, he stated that the purpose of this seminar was as under:-

1. To celebrate the historic victory of the Indian Armed Forces and the brave people of Bangladesh, which finally led to the liberation of Bangladesh.
2. Generating awareness among the people, especially the youth of today about the role of the Mukti Bahini and the people of Bangladesh in the Liberation War as well as that of the Indian armed forces and the sacrifices made on either side of the Indo Bangladesh borders.

He further paid tribute to the courage, grit and determination of the Officers and Other Ranks of the Indian Armed Forces and the cadres of the Mukti Bahini and the common people of Bangladesh who resisted the atrocities of the Pakistan Army to fight for their liberation. This address was succeeded by the Book Release function of the Book titled '*Liberation, Bangladesh 1971 – First Hand Untold Action Stories from the War Zone*'.

## **REFLECTION & RECOLLECTION**

**Chief Guest: Hon'ble Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd)**

The Hon'ble Governor narrated his experiences of the war zone in 1971. He stated that he was a young Captain in 2 PARA Battalion of the Indian Army when the war took place. The Battalion was instrumental in launching the first and perhaps the only airborne assault of the Indian Army at Tangail on 11 December 1971 and on 16<sup>th</sup> December, the battalion group comprising a battalion and a battery of 17 Para Field regiment and other elements of the Para Brigade entered Dhaka.

The Speaker through a couple of anecdotes recalled the simple yet emotionally charged actions of an Air Force Sergeant and a Flight Lieutenant which specifically pointed towards the inter service deep comaradrie that existed at functional levels during testing times of the war.

The speaker further stated that the night of 15-16 December witnessed the last encounter near the *Mirpur* Bridge at the outskirts of Dhaka. The General Officer recalled and narrated the event when he was tasked to take a message to Gen Niazi to surrender. While carrying out his task, he and his men evaded death on multiple occasions. They managed to survive not only due to their presence of mind and exemplary courage, but also due to sheer luck as well. He further stressed on the fact that in a war, the opportunities need to be exploited and one has to calculated take chances at times.

The third issue that he talked about was the poor leadership of the Pakistan Army. He stated that owing to the poor leadership, the morale of the Pakistani forces was low. To relate to this fact, the General officer shared another event where the Commandant of the Pakistani garrison mistook a battalion worth Para drop to be a complete Para Brigade drop. This resulted in panic in the rank and files of the Pakistani forces at Jamalpur and other places and thus they lost the will to fight. The speaker was delighted to share the fact that on the Jamalpur axis on 11 December the Para's were farthest from Dhaka but by 16<sup>th</sup> December they were the closest. When the forces moved into Pakistani Eastern Command HQ and walked into Gen Niazi's office, the then Captain Sharma distinctly remembered the despair on Gen Niazi's face.

The speaker further narrated that on the day of surrender, Pakistan had sufficient troops to hold Dhaka for a considerably longer period of time. However instead of

holding their position and fighting on, the Pakistan Army decided to surrender. On the other side, India had learnt its lessons from the debacle of 1962. The wars of 1962 and 1965 had produced battle hardened company and battalion commanders, who led their men from the front.

The speaker also narrated the story of three soldiers who showed overwhelming keenness to be a part of the Liberation War, that bore testimony to the Indian soldiers willingness to seek battle. He concluded with a remark that the victory of 1971 was the Golden Arc of Indian History, which is something to cherish for all times to come.

### **Guest of Honour: Lt Gen JFR Jacob, PVSM**

The General Officer at the time of the war was the Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command of the Indian Army and was instrumental in the planning of the conduct of this hugely successful military campaign. The speaker emphasized on the relevance and significance of both mental and physical mobility in war. In the Bangladesh War it was this very crucial factor that surprised the enemy at various fronts thus changing the tide of War in India's favor. The speaker enriched the narrations of various other speakers by contributing his experiences during the war from time to time.

### **Special Guest: Gen Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Former COAS**

The General Officer saw action in the Bangladesh Liberation War while being posted to 23 Mountain Regiment and being attached to HQ 61 Mountain Brigade as a GSO3. In his narration the General Officer brought out three major aspects of the Bangladesh Campaign as follows:-

1. It was perhaps the single largest victory of the Indian Armed Forces and the Mukti Bahini.
2. After the debacle of 1962, the Indian Army needed a morale booster and it needed to improve its image both for itself as well as in the eyes of the Indian public. This victory provided the much needed self confidence and restored the pride of the Indian Armed Forces.
3. This campaign also fostered a relationship between India and Bangladesh on two fronts, namely:-
  - a) First was the army-to-army relationship which started with the Mukti Bahini's participation in the war alongside the Indian Army and which continues till date and with the passage of time it has prospered, progressed and reached much greater heights.

- b) Second was the nation-to-nation relationship, in all walks of life.
- c) The General Officer further reiterated that this relation except for a few ups and downs has not only endured but has also grown.

Apart from this the single most important factor, which brought about this great victory was the role of the common citizens of Bangladesh. Initially when the election took place in December 1970, inspite of emerging as a single largest party, the Awami League was denied their due and when the common citizens joined the protests against the Yahya regime in not honouring the election results, they were subject to tremendous atrocities by the Pakistani Forces from March 1971. Their support for the Mukti Bahini and public anger against the Pakistani forces was clearly witnessed as the war started. This provided a psychological edge to the Indian Forces and Mukti Bahini against the Pakistani Forces. It thus had a crucial impact on the strategy for the conduct of the campaign as well to a significant extent on the final outcome. The General Officer also narrated an incident of the surrender of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade of Pakistan Army under the command of Brig Aslam Khan on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1971. This force of approximately seventeen hundred men surrendered to forty odd soldiers of Indian army for the fear of being lynched by Bangladeshi public. This specifically highlighted the effect that the anger of the Bangladesh's common citizens had on the morale of the Pakistani troops.

## **SPECIAL ADDRESS**

### **H.E Mr. Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India**

In 1971 the speaker was serving in the Pakistani Embassy in Washington. The High Commissioner in his address brought out that as soon as the crackdown by the Pakistani forces began in Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan), the Pakistani propaganda machine started rolling. They flatly refused the existence of any Liberation War and termed it an India Pakistan struggle and termed the unrest as a creation of Indian agents. The provisional government of Bangladesh did not exist at that time, however the initial work for it had already picked up pace in the background. His tenure with the Pakistan Embassy gave him an opportunity to learn more about the propaganda and publicity campaign launched by Pakistan.

Pakistani made a series of mistakes which proved beneficial for the Bangladeshi cause, the first being expelling foreign journalists and expatriates from Dhaka in 1971. The expatriates who had witnessed the brutality themselves in Dhaka were instrumental in establishing the Bangladesh Information Centre on their return to US. Pakistan also tried to portray the Liberation War as an East- West Rivalry as well as termed it a secessionist war in order to dissuade any support from the international community.

The Speaker was closely monitoring the Pakistani Publicity and was passing on information through the already setup Bangladesh Information Centre to the relevant persons in the US Congress. Pakistan being a SEATO and CENTO ally, was getting considerable amount of military assistance from the US. The speaker also brought out that the then US President, Richard Nixon had completely sided with Pakistan. Till then Pakistan had successfully managed to establish cordial relations with both Washington and Beijing and thus had an important place in the US grand strategy to reconcile with China.

To take the Bangladesh cause ahead, the Speaker had to convince the American leadership that it was not a secessionist war especially as the “Bangladeshi’s” were a majority in Pakistan and so the question of secession simply did not arise. It was in fact a struggle for greater degree of autonomy. Despite his best efforts it was proving difficult to convince the American leadership. However the Bangladesh Information Centre pressed on with its efforts. Slowly the efforts paid off with the proposal to amend the US assistance to Pakistan. The Speaker along with his colleagues endeavored to point out the fact that the military assistance to Pakistan was aimed at countering the Soviet Union, whereas in reality it was being used against the people of Bangladesh.



The Speaker also brought out that once the War started, Pakistan was in a dilemma as to the handling of officers from Bangladesh. As high ranking officials of the Pakistani foreign services, they had to be tackled tactfully to ward off the likelihood of them defecting.

He further stated that to avoid UN mediation and a ceasefire, the whole strategy was to finish the war as quickly as possible. When the conflict was brought up for discussion in the UN, the Soviet Union came to the rescue by vetoing three resolutions proposed in the UN. However there were some limitations to the Soviet influence in the UN and hence the war had to end soon. If the thirty thousand odd Pakistani defenders of Dhaka had decided to stand their ground, it would have been a prolonged battle and thus would have made matters difficult at diplomatic front. Simultaneously, Gen Niazi was making speeches about the Pakistani army's intent to fight till the last man, which further escalated the tension for the diplomats committed to the Bangladesh cause.

To make matters worse, after the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, the two world powers i.e. US and USSR were on a verge of a standoff in the Bay of Bengal as the Soviet and Western forces fielded their nuclear armed naval assets to support the two protagonists. The US asked the Chinese to deploy their forces near the Indian borders to pressurize India, however, fortunately the Chinese decided to stay away from this crisis. He concluded his talk by stating that finally all critical decisions were in India's favor and Bangladesh managed to gain freedom from the Pakistan.

## **SPECIAL SESSION: RECOUNTING THE ACTION**

### **Remarks by the Chair: Brig KP Singh Deo, AVSM, VSM, Former Rajya Raksha Mantri**

The chair shared an interesting anecdote in which he quoted the Director of Imperial War museum, Sir Noland Franklin's approach to war. For him war was like a disease and one had to study it to avoid it and to survive it. He then invited the eminent speakers to share their experiences and reflections of the war.

### **Lt Col Sajjad Ali Zahir.SwadhintaPadak. BirProtik**

For his valour in the battle of Borolekha, the Speaker was awarded the 'Bir Protik' Gallantry Award during the Liberation War in 1971. He was also awarded Swadhinata Padak in 2013, which is the Highest National Award of Bangladesh. The speaker during his address recalled the atrocities committed by the elements of the Pakistani forces and the deep impact it left on the psyche of the common people of Bangladesh. The speaker pointed out towards the importance of documenting the experiences of the brave soldiers who witnessed the war first hand. The speaker who also is the co-editor of the book, 'Liberation, *Bangladesh 1971 – First Hand Untold Action Stories from the War Zone*', highlighted the significance of such seminal pieces, which according to him are important elements of history. The Speaker further stated that it was nothing but a strong resolve of the common people of Bangladesh to seek freedom which forced the Pakistani forces to surrender despite having a sizeable force present in Dhaka and also the lack of public support made the idea of street to street fight virtually impossible and suicidal.

### **Col Ashok Kumar Tara. VrC**

The Speaker was a veteran of the 1965 and 1971 wars. He was awarded the Vir Chakra for his valour in the Battle of Gangasagar. The speaker narrated the episode of how he was instrumental in rescuing the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, who were held in house arrest by the Pakistani troops. He brought out the importance of psychological warfare and how he used it to convince the Pakistani troops to release the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman without any force being employed. Since he did not have the troops to confront the Pakistani soldiers guarding the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, he maintained his calm and with authority informed them that the

Pakistan Army had surrendered to Indian Army and they should also follow suit and hand over the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to him, However the Pakistani soldiers were not convinced. However by chance at that VERY MOMENT AN Indian Helicopter flew overhead. Using his presence of mind, he pointed out the Indian Helicopter to the Pakistani soldiers and told them that Indian Army was in full control and they should surrender. This sowed the seed of doubt in the mind of Pakistani soldiers. Encashed on the uncertainty in the minds of Pakistani soldiers, Colonel Tara stepped forward and held the rifle of the Pakistani soldier and once again asked them to surrender or face the wrath of the angry crowds. The Pakistani soldiers at this juncture surrendered and Colonel Tara took charge of the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. The speaker also narrated that he was informed of a Pakistani national flag hoisted atop the same building. He quickly rushed to the roof top and lowered the Pakistani flag and hoisted the Bangladesh national flag. This act of his brought loud applause from the crowd that had gathered around the house. For this act of rescuing the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the Bangladesh government awarded him with a 'Friends of Bangladesh Liberation War Honor' on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Liberation War.

### **Brig OS Goraya**

Brig Goraya participated in the 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars. In the Liberation War of 1971, he was the Brigade Major of an Artillery Brigade. In his narration he touched on the operations in Akhaura and Ashuganj.

Battle of Akhaura. The Speaker brought out that the Battle of Akhaura in Dec 1971 was one of the fiercest battles of the Eastern Sector. The Indian Army managed to overrun the Pakistani 27 Brigade positions and forced them to retreat. Akhaura was an important railway junction and thus the capture of which necessary to end the war. The speaker specifically spoke about the artillery's contribution in this particular battle. The infantry plan was complex making the task of the fire controller very challenging. Hence six fire plans were kept ready, thus providing fire support as and when required by the fighting troops.

Operations at Ashuganj. In his second narration, the Speaker spoke about operations at Ashuganj where two infantry battalions 10 Bihar and 18 Rajput assisted by tanks pressed on with their attack to take advantage of the Pakistani forces retreating. In their quest to capture the bridge on Ashuganj, this force ran out of the Artillery guns range. The infantry encountered stiff Pakistani opposition under the command of Brig Saadullah Khan who managed to give the Indian forces a '*bloody nose*'. However the

Indian Air Force stepped in and provided the much needed fire support and the enemy resistance was neutralized.

The speaker also shared the out of the box thinking put into use by the officers and ranks of the Indian Army in which trains were used as mobile platforms for transporting as well as bringing down artillery fire on the enemy position.

### **Cmde Ranjit Rai**

The Speaker spoke about the operations of Indian Navy in the 1971 Liberation War. He brought out that the Indian Naval divers in 1971, were instrumental in sinking of more than 200,000 tons of Pakistani naval assets. This gave a great blow to the Pakistani War effort. He further narrated that INS Vikrant was instrumental in attacks in Cox Bazaar, Chittagong, and Khulna. The Navy played a crucial role in blocking and destroying Pakistan's Sea Lines of Communications.

On 4<sup>th</sup> December 1971, INS Rajput sighted a suspicious disturbance resembling a periscope whilst on patrol off Visakhapatnam coast and launched depth charges on the same. This led to the sinking of the PNS Ghazi. The attack on Karachi and the sinking of the Pakistani Submarine were the greatest blow delivered by the Indian Navy to the Pakistani forces. It attacked and destroyed powerhouse, airfields, and naval installations of Pakistan.

### **WgCdr Vinod Nebb. VrC\*\***

The Speaker spoke about the operations of Indian Air Force in the 1971 Liberation War. He brought out that the orders for the Air Force were clear, which were to achieve total air superiority and then provide close air support to the ground forces. The Indian Air Force enjoyed numerical superiority over its adversary in the Eastern Sector. The IAF quickly neutralized the Dhaka Airfields, thus greatly reducing the PAF capabilities.

Wg Cdr Nebb distinctly recalled the event which took place on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1971, when through sheer grit, determination and presence of mind, he had managed to engage and shoot down an aircraft relatively superior to that of his. For this brave act of his, he was awarded the VrC.

Another interesting event that the speaker narrated was when while returning from one of the missions, he did not engage an unmarked aircraft, which he later found out could have been Gen Niazi's aircraft.

### **Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM**

The General Officer was not scheduled to speak, however at the special request of the Chair, he agreed to share his experiences of 1971. He spoke about the Battle of Atgram, which was significant as it is probably the last known Khukri assault in military history and was carried out without the support of the artillery or other personal weapons, but just with grenades and Khukris. The Pakistanis suffered many casualties as a result of this fierce and swift assault and had a devastating impact on the Pakistani psyche and will to fight. The success at Atgram made the battalion a celebrity unit of the Indian military. Post this, the unit although was reduced to half its strength, was tasked to launch a Khukri assault in the operations at Gazipur and Sylhet. At one instance a wrong report by the BBC greatly worked in the unit's favor. The BBC announced that a brigade of Gorkhas had landed in Sylhet, where as it was just half a battalion that had landed. The Indian troops capitalized on this piece of information by extending their flanks and even at the cost of thinning on ground in order to make the enemy believe that it was a Brigade strength force. The gamble paid off and a force of approximately nine thousand Pakistani soldiers surrendered to just approximately 450 Indian soldiers.

### **Maj Chandrakant Singh VrC**

Maj Chandrakant Singh was part of 4 GUARDS Infantry Battalion of Indian Army in 1971 and was injured during the capture of Narsingde. He started his talk by stating that mobility is a state of mind and an infantryman's two feet are the best form of mobility. The speaker pointed towards the high numbers of Indian officer casualties both fatal and injured vis-à-vis other ranks. He brought out that the casualty figures talk of the leadership of the officer cadre in the Indian Army.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS BY DIRECTOR CLAWS**

The Director on behalf of CLAWS thanked the speakers and the panelists for their reflections and recollections. The Director also shared two anecdotes of his interactions with Bangladeshi officers who displayed exemplary bravery and devotion inspite of overwhelming odds. He further reiterated that the account, description, narrative and portrayal of events by the veterans have been an enriching, inspiring and learning experience and was confident that the insight into the operations as narrated by them would enabled us to grasp the enormity of the challenges and difficulties faced and overcome by them. He further expressed hope that the seminar would contribute to further strengthening of the relations between the two countries, and at the same time also be a good learning experience for the current and future generations of both the countries. Finally the Director thanked the audience for being an attentive and supportive audience and thereafter declared the seminar closed.