

## **Tangail 1971 – Army & Air Force Synergy**

The Tangail Airdrop was the first classic parachute operation mounted by India since Independence. The Airdrop was executed on 11 December 1971 by 2 Parachute Battalion Group under the command of Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Kulwant Singh Panu. The Battalion Group included a Para Field Battery of 17 Parachute Field Regiment, an Engineer Platoon of 411 (Independent) Parachute Field Company, Signallers, Medical Detachment including a Surgical Team and other support and administrative troops. This Airborne assault was intended to transport troops for immediate operations to achieve a considerable shock effect on the enemy and produce results out of proportion to their numerical strength and firepower. The operation shattered the will of the Pakistani Army to defend Dhaka and led to the collapse of Dhaka's defences and a speedy end to the war.

Four different airborne operations had been planned for the Eastern Theatre, however three of them were not found necessary. The fourth operation involved the air dropping of a Para Battalion Group North of Tangail, its main objective was to capture of Poongli Bridge on Jamalpur-Tangail road.<sup>1</sup>

The initial plans for airborne operations had been worked out during a meeting attended by Lieutenant General JS Aurora, the Eastern Army Commander, Major General JFR Jacob (Chief of Staff Eastern Command) Brigadier Mathew Thomas, Commander 50 (Independent) Para Brigade and Air Commadore S. Purshottam, Air-Officer Commanding, Advance Headquarters Eastern Air Command<sup>2</sup>

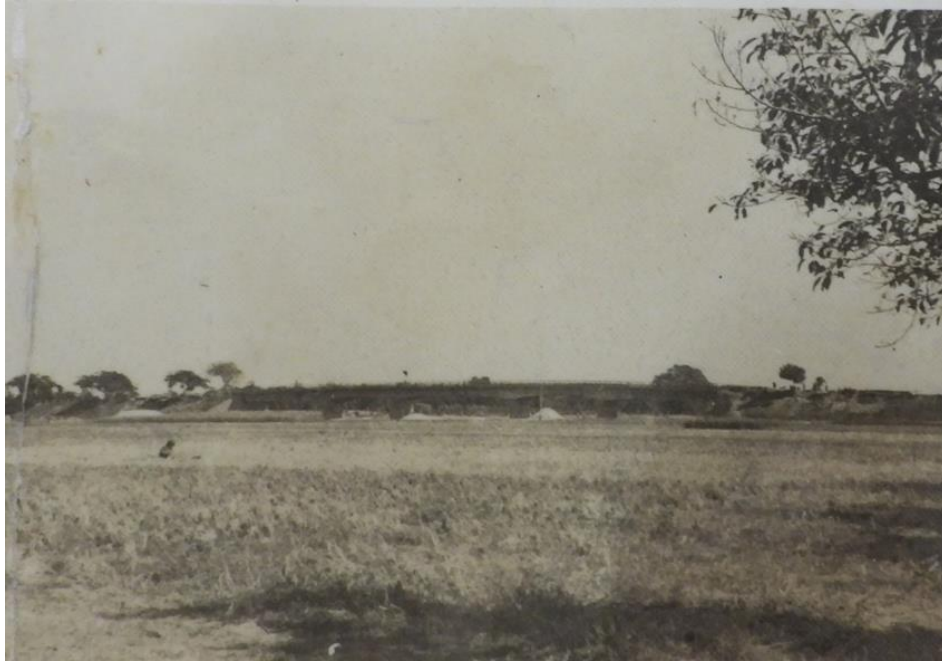
The overall objectives of the airborne operations were:

1. Capture of the crucial Poongli Bridge over the Lohajang River.
2. Secure the Ferry Crossing Point and the ferries on the East of the Bridge.
3. Intercept and prevent Pakistani 93 Infantry Brigade withdrawing from Jamalpur and Mymensingh across the river for defending Dhaka.
4. Link up with 1 Maratha Light Infantry and push towards Dhaka to capture it.

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<sup>1</sup> Government of India, 1992, Official 1971 War History

<sup>2</sup> Bhupinder S. Nijjar, The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War Heli-Borne Assault On Sylhet, The Planned “Vertical Envelopment” Operation, Defence And Diplomacy Journal Of The Centre For Air Power Studies Vol. 10 No. 2 January-March 2021, p. 7



*Poongli Bridge intact: Picture taken by Capt. KR Nair*  
Source: Lieutenant Colonel RS Bangari

The Operation Order for the paratroop was prepared in mid-October by Air Vice-Marshal Charan Das Guru Devasher, Brigadier Mathew Thomas, Commander 50 (Independent) Para Brigade and Major General JFR Jacob. They planned the drop to take place on D plus 7 and the link up within twenty-four hours. Major General Jacob had earlier briefed the GOC 101 Communications Zone Area in Fort William on the details of the plan, who was optimistic that he would capture Dacca by D plus 10. The plan was jointly formalised in consultation with Major General Inder Singh Gill, PVSM, MC, who was then the Director of Military Operations at the Army Head Quarters and Colonel of the Para Regiment.<sup>3</sup>

The Tangail area chosen for dropping the Para Battalion Group as it lay east of Madhupur Forest and consisted of the typical marshy plains of Bengal, where villages occupy the ground clustered round trees, with the inevitable village ponds on their outskirts.<sup>4</sup> It was considered a safe drop zone because it was held by Tiger Siddiqui of Mukti Bahini with his force of 20,000. Tangail afforded a suitable jumping off area for the attack on Dacca and was also suitably located for a link up by forces from the north. Gen. Gill, on receiving the order for the airdrop asked Major General Jacob to consider the airfield at Kurmitola in Dacca rather than Tangail and Brigadier Mathew Thomas also agreed with his view. Major General Jacob however told Major General Inder Gill that Kurmitola was well defended with Air Defence Batteries, Air Force considered it too risky and stressed that a link up with the Indian attacking troops at Kurmitola was very difficult. In the Inter-Service Operation Order issued by Major General Inder Gill he included Kurmitola as an alternative.<sup>5</sup>

In early November, a Joint Coordinating HQ had been set up at Calcutta to coordinate the execution of the airborne operation and the Air Transport Force Commander Group Captain Gurdeep Singh was involved with the Commander Para Brigade in the conduct of a series of war games to fine-tune the operational

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<sup>3</sup> Lt. Gen. J.F.R. Jacob, *An Odyssey in War and Peace: An Autobiography*, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, *India's Wars Since Independence*, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Lt. Gen. J.F.R. Jacob, *An Odyssey in War and Peace: An Autobiography*, 2015, p. 86 and p. 88

execution. <sup>6</sup> The Air Force team comprised of Group Captain Gurdeep Singh, Wing Commander Arjun Ralli, Squadron Leader SP Maini and Squadron Leader Minoo Vania. These plans were approved on November 16 by both the Army and Air Force by Lieutenant General JS Aurora and Air Marshal HC Dewan. The effective joint planning between the Army and Air Force resulted in a well-orchestrated airborne assault in its entirety. <sup>7</sup>



*Lt. Col. KS Pannu, CO and 2 Para Officers in a huddle around maps and airphotos, Botanical Gardens, Calcutta*  
Source: Lieutenant Colonel RS Bangari

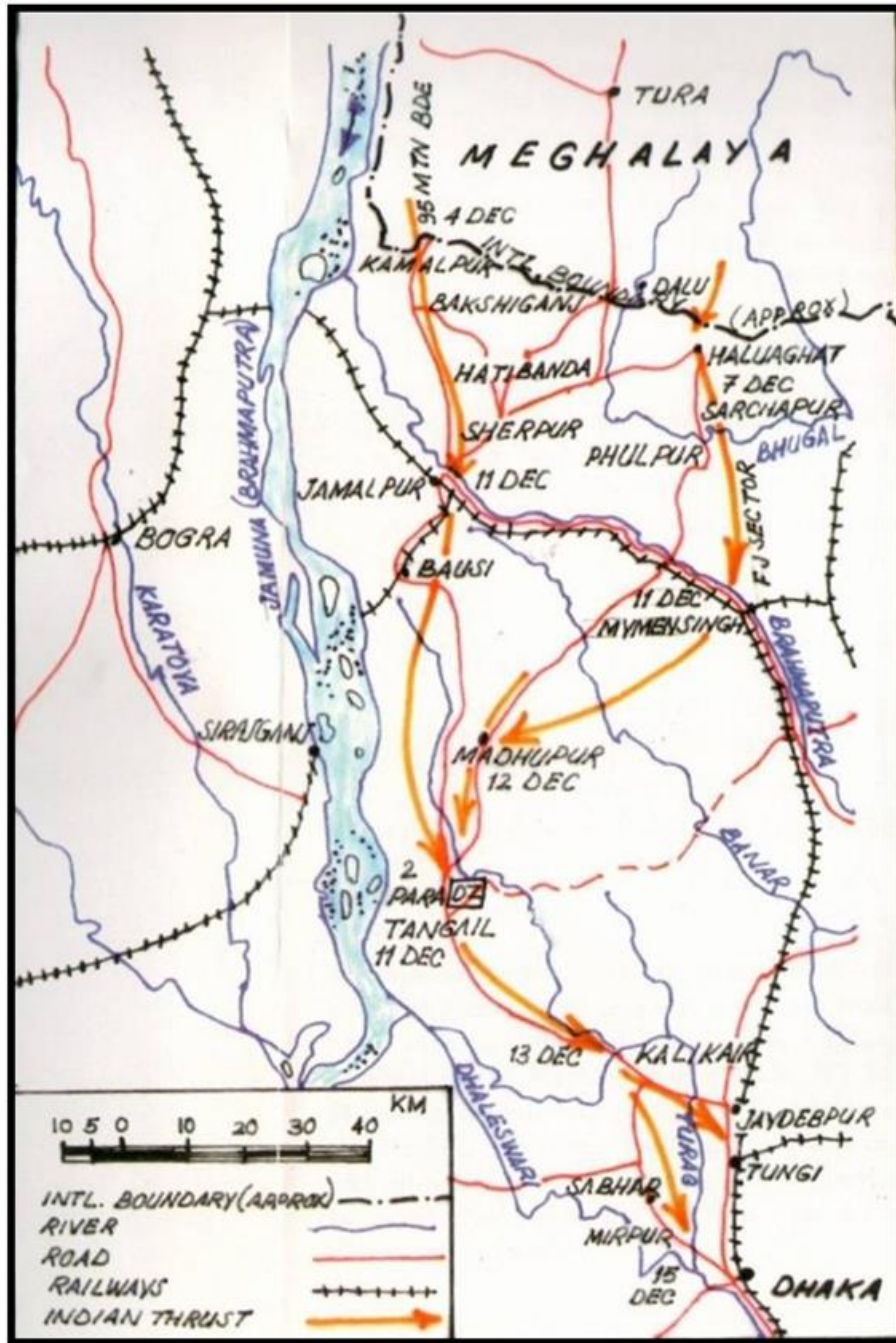
In mid-November, Captain PK Ghosh of the Parachute Brigade Signal Company, a bold and adventurous officer, fluent in Bangla, was infiltrated into the Tangail area and tasked to establish contact with Tiger Siddiqui to persuade him to provide detailed intelligence and to support the airborne drop.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Maj. K. C. Praval, *India's Paratroopers: (a History of the Parachute Regiment of India)*, Thomson Press (India), Publication Division, 1974, p. 291-2

<sup>7</sup> Bhupinder S. Nijjar, *The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War Heli-Borne Assault On Sylhet, The Planned "Vertical Envelopment" Operation*, *Defence And Diplomacy Journal Of The Centre For Air Power Studies* Vol. 10 No. 2 January-March 2021, P. 7

<sup>8</sup> Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia, *Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War*, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October–December 2021, p. 229–249



*Indian Army thrust into Bangladesh 1971*

Source: ADGPI

The fleet of transport aircraft to be used for the operation consisted of AN-12s, Packets and Dakotas which had been marshalled at Gorakhpur, Phaphamau and Bhita by 10 December and ferried to Dum Dum and Kalaikunda, on the following day. The well-knit integrated planning helped execute a day drop undertaken on 11 December by 48 aircraft - six AN-12s and twenty Packet aircraft operating from Dum Dum and twenty-two Dakota aircraft from Kalaikunda.<sup>9</sup> Dum Dum was for civil aviation and not intended for use for security purposes. On the insistence of IAF, the aircraft were loaded and flew out in full gaze of the world press, which helped spread exaggerated reports of the para strength used.<sup>10</sup> The group took off at 1430 hours, the initial plan for a night drop having been changed to dusk drop due to the prevailing favourable air situation i.e. India's complete supremacy in the air.

<sup>9</sup> Government of India, 1992, Official 1971 War History

<sup>10</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, India's Wars Since Independence, 2013

Before the main drop was undertaken, a Pathfinder force in a Packet aircraft was dropped on the DZ site and two Caribous, employed simultaneously as decoys, dropped dummies about 16 km away from the actual DZ.<sup>11</sup>

The Pathfinder group secured and marked the Drop Zone by 1555 hours on 11 December. The pathfinders dropped in broad daylight on the selected Zone, surrounded by villages well away from the main road. There was no Pakistani troop interference at the time of the drop, however the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages panicked and began to run away from the area. When the cry of “Jai Bangla” from the paratroopers reassured them, they later flocked to the Dropping Zone, all eager to carry loads and act as guides.<sup>12</sup>

After the pathfinders the main drop commenced with the AN-12s delivering the heavy loads, followed by the Packets with platform loads and troops. The Dakotas brought up the rear, carrying mostly men though some of them also had door loads of 250 kg. While it had been planned to drop 800 troops and 152.4 tonnes of supplies, including 22 heavy platform loads of guns and vehicles, the actual drop consisted of 750 officers and men of 50 Para Brigade with their arms, equipment and light vehicles. Fighter cover for the transport aircraft during different phases of the para drop operations was provided by Gnat and MiG aircraft.<sup>13</sup>



*CO, 2 Para, Lt. Col. KS Pannu with Brig. HS Kler and CO, 1 Maratha LI, Lt. Col. KS Brar at link-up on the Poongli bridge, 12 Dec. 1971*

Source: Lieutenant Colonel RS Bangari

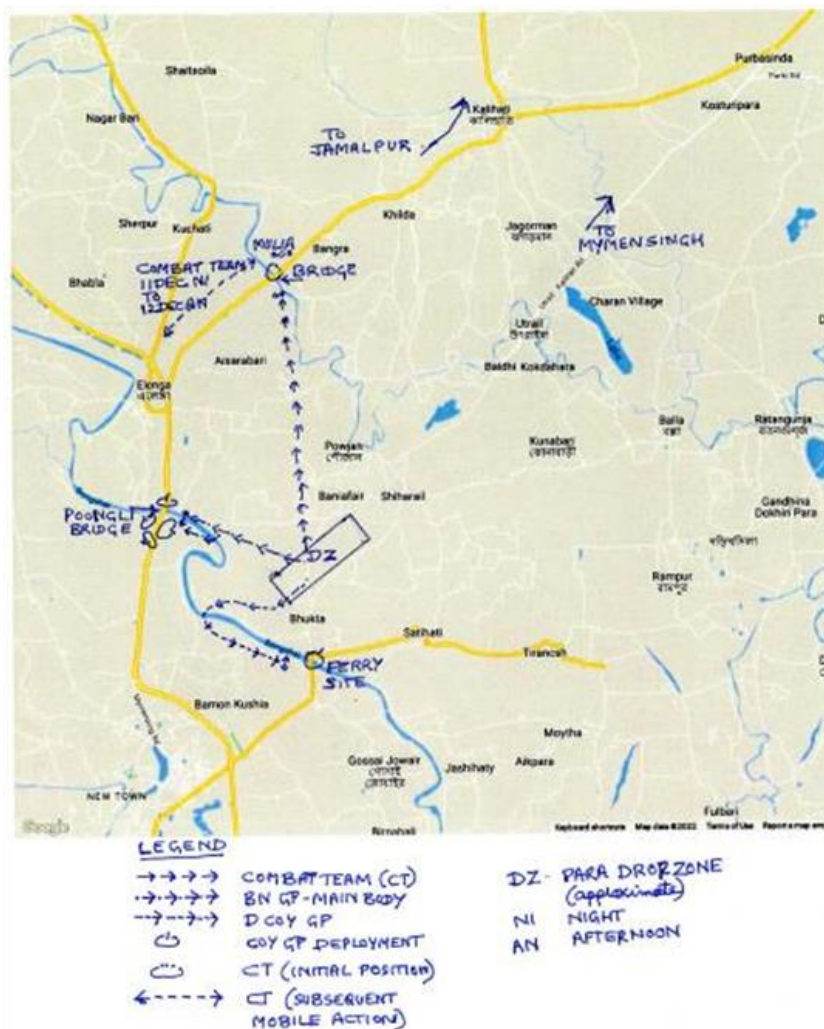
The entire drop was completed by 1605 hours, without interference. Two aircraft out of 50 could not drop their loads. The paratroopers in one of them were dropped about 1600 hours the next day. The other aircraft load of one Para Field Gun never materialized. Of the remaining 48 aircraft, 46 discharged their loads correctly and two went astray. One dropped its troops near Kali Hati, about 15 miles North of the Dropping

<sup>11</sup> Government of India, 1992, Official 1971 War History

<sup>12</sup> Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia, Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October–December 2021, p. 229–249

<sup>13</sup> Government of India, 1992, Official 1971 War History

Zone. These men were fired upon in descent. They had to fight their way out and rejoined the Battalion Group the next day. The other aircraft discharged one jeep about four miles South of the Dropping Zone, and this was retrieved subsequently. Because some heavy loads were discharged away from the Dropping Zone, only four Para Field Guns became available, and of the rest four jeeps landed in ponds about six to seven feet deep and had to be pulled out with the help of local inhabitants the next day. Similarly, about half the supply drops on skid boards also fell either in water or in villages. These were retrieved throughout the night by the villagers and were delivered to the battalion group the next day. The paratrooping spread was well over two and half miles and some men, including the Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel KS Pannu, fell into ponds, where they nearly drowned. Despite this, within two hours of the drop the whole Battalion Group had fetched up at the rendezvous carrying their loads. By dark with the help of local guides the fighting echelons moved off in three groups towards their objectives. One Company Group, crossed the Lohajang River South of Akua village, proceeded to the ferry site and occupied it without any opposition by about 2000 hours on 11 December. A Team of one Infantry Section strengthened by MMG and RCL detachments went towards the Mulia Bridge to establish a roadblock and provide advance information of enemy movement along the Jamalpur-Tangail road.<sup>14</sup>



Area of Paradrop at Tangail

Source : Lieutenant Colonel RS Bangari

The main body, consisting of the remainder of the Battalion, moved towards Poongli Bridge. Small arms fire was heard from the Bridge by reconnaissance patrols moving ahead of the main body, but by the time the assaulting Companies crossed the river southward, the enemy of about Platoon strength, fled towards Dacca.

<sup>14</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, India's Wars Since Independence, 2013

Not a single Pakistani soldier was captured or killed on the objective. The Battalion Group took up defences on both sides of the Poongli Bridge.<sup>15</sup> Advancing from the South, First Maratha Light Infantry, a sister Battalion, broke through the Tangail defence to link up with the 2 PARA (Maratha) at the bridgehead that very evening.<sup>16</sup>

About 2000 hours on 11 December, a long line of vehicle lights was seen approaching the area it was defending from the North, they belonged to the Jamalpur or Mymensingh garrisons withdrawing to Dacca. The column was allowed to approach to within a hundred yards or so, when the forward Company opened fire. The leading vehicle, towing a heavy mortar carrying ammunition, blew up instantly, and then there was a close-quarter battle for half an hour or so. Three or four follow-up vehicles were also damaged, but on the whole the remainder of the column managed to reverse and withdraw Northwards. The Pakistanis made one or two half-hearted efforts to remove the roadblock at the Poongli Bridge, but they were beaten back. The battalion claimed 143 enemy killed, with their own losses four killed and two wounded, and concluded that they were attacked by two Battalions, 33 Punjab and 31 Baluch, supplemented by about a thousand Razakars.

A report issued the next day said the enemy tried to outflank the Poongli Bridge but hit the Dropping Zone gun position and suffered further casualties. Some of them sought refuge in neighbouring villages. About midday a party of about 250 men approached the Battalion position with their weapons held high above their heads with the obvious desire to surrender. They were allowed to close within 100 yards of the front line and told to lay down their arms, suddenly they decided to go to the ground and start firing. That was the beginning of a murderous exchange of fire which cost them very heavy casualties.<sup>17</sup>

On 12 December, a pre-planned resupply for the troops of 50 (Independent) Para Brigade was carried out by five AN-12s and one Packet aircraft which dropped 40 troops and 45 tonnes of second line ammunition and other supplies.<sup>18</sup>

By now Jamalpur and Mymensingh had been captured and the advance of 95 Mountain Brigade Group and FJ Sector resumed. Radio contact was established with the Advance Guard about 1630 hours on 12 December, and half an hour later the linkup with the Main Body took place, thus bringing to a conclusion the airborne aspect of the operation. Since nothing happened during the rest of the day, numerous patrols were sent out on 13 December to comb the nearby villages and surrounding area, but no trace was found of the remainder of the enemy column. The detachment sent earlier to establish a roadblock at the Mulia Bridge arrived as the enemy vehicles were crossing it and managed to engage some vehicles.<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Ramamohan Rao was the Public Relations Officer of the Army in Delhi in 1971, he was attached to the office of the Army Chief. The Director of Military Operations, Major General Inder Gill had asked him to ensure good publicity for the para drop at Tangail. Till the morning of 12 December 1971, the Chief Public Relations Officer of the Eastern Command, Colonel BP Rikhye, could not arrange for the pictures as the paradrop originated from a place where he had no access. Therefore, it occurred to Mr Rao that he could use a photograph from defence photo section which was published a year or so earlier when he had covered an

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<sup>15</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, *India's Wars Since Independence*, 2013

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/assets/uploads/home\\_banner/1971\\_INDO-PAKWAR\\_AM\\_JS\\_221118-2022-11-30.pdf](https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/assets/uploads/home_banner/1971_INDO-PAKWAR_AM_JS_221118-2022-11-30.pdf), accessed 28 Nov 2023

<sup>17</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, *India's Wars Since Independence*, 2013

<sup>18</sup> Government of India, 1992, *Official 1971 War History*

<sup>19</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, *India's Wars Since Independence*, 2013

exercise by the Para Brigade. This picture was released with a caption ‘Troops of the Indian Para Brigade were airdropped over East Pakistan on the morning of 12th December.’ Mr Rao had deliberately omitted saying that it was a file photograph. The photograph made it appear that an entire Para Brigade had been airdropped. The picture of the paratroop was published on the front pages of the newspapers all over the world, including leading newspapers in the United Kingdom like the Times, London, and the New York Times in the United States.

A week after the surrender of Pakistani troops in Dhaka Mr Rao heard from an officer who was present in Dacca, that when asked why the Pakistan Army surrendered, even though it could have held on for weeks, Lieutenant General Niazi pointed at a copy of the Times London, on his table which carried a photograph of the airdrop of the troops of the Indian Para Brigade as one of the reasons.<sup>20</sup> Right up to the end of hostilities, Niazi and his associates believed that India was employing the Brigade strength of its paratroops, and this further unnerved him.<sup>21</sup>

Deception and surprise were inbuilt in the plans and succeeded in deceiving the Pakistan Army into believing that the advance of 101 Communication Zone was diversionary. This was an intentional move by Lieutenant General JS Aurora to mislead the enemy into thinking that the Indian Army’s advance into Dhaka would take place through the Comilla border. To further reinforce the deception plan, Major General Jacob addressed a press conference in Calcutta on the night of 11 December after the drop saying that the Indian paratroopers had surrounded Dhaka city and that Dhaka was waiting to fall any day as it was surrounded by a division. However, in reality, the Division was a Battalion of paratroopers who had dropped not in Dhaka but over 100 km North in Tangail. Pakistani command was distressed by this bluff; it created a tremendous amount of psychological pressure on General Niazi to surrender. The airborne assault at Tangail surprised the Pakistani leadership, thus speeding up the fall of Dhaka and an early end to the war.<sup>22</sup>

The Tangail Airdrop and the subsequent capture of the Poongli Bridge gave the advancing Indian Army the manoeuvrability to side-step the strongly held Tongi-Dacca Road to take the undefended Manikganj-Dacca Road right up to Mirpur Bridge at the gates of Dacca. General Niazi accepted the offer to surrender around 1045 hours on 16 December 1971, 2 PARA (Maratha) was the first to enter Dhaka.

Lieutenant Colonel Kulwant Singh Pannu was awarded the MVC for his leadership in battle. In this operation, the Battalion won a total of 14 awards: one MVC, six VrC, four SM, and three Mentions in Dispatches. For this and their role in capture of the strategic bridge, 2 PARA received battle honour for Poongli Bridge and Theatre honour for Dacca.

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<sup>20</sup> I. Ramamohan Rao, A Psy-Op That Aided The Tangail Paratroop: Bangla War, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/on-dec-12-1971-a-psy-op-that-aided-the-tangail-paratroop-bangla-war-113121200307\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/on-dec-12-1971-a-psy-op-that-aided-the-tangail-paratroop-bangla-war-113121200307_1.html), accessed 28 Nov 2023

<sup>21</sup> Maj Gen Sukhwant Singh, *India's Wars Since Independence*, 2013

<sup>22</sup> Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia, Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October–December 2021, p. 229–249