

## **OPERATION MEGHNA: A Heli Bridge Across Meghna River**

India gained Independence in 1947, however this resulted in the partition of the country and the creation of Pakistan. Initially, Pakistan had two Wings; East and West Pakistan which were geographically separated by 1600 kms of Indian Territory, there was also separation due to language and culture. However, the ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversities between the two wings could not be bridged by an emotional appeal to religion. Consequently, fissures started erupting in the political body of Pakistan soon after the Independence and with each passing year it widened. The 1965 War also contributed to this growing divide. In the absence of appropriate defence arrangements, the people of East Pakistan felt isolated and abandoned. Finally, the malfeasance of Pakistani leadership during Cyclone Bhola and the overwhelming support for the Awami League in the 1970 elections, proved the proverbial last straw on the camel's back.<sup>1</sup>



*The support provided by the local population to the Indian Army was invaluable*

Source: <https://salute.co.in/4-guards-crosses-the-meghna/>

In an attempt to contain the refugee crisis and find a solution to the escalating violence along own borders, India asked Pakistan to ensure safe return of Pakistani refugees from India. However, instead of peaceful talks, Pakistan with a steady support from United States internationalized the issue by attacking India on 03 December 1971.

The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three Services on a large scale. The War was fought on two fronts, the Eastern and the Western. On the Eastern side, Pakistan adopted the defensive strategy to delay the ingress of Indian troops,

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<sup>1</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India

while on the Western side, it adopted the aggressive policy to occupy some Indian territory so as to force the Indian Armed Forces to give up gains in East Pakistan and divert troops to the Western front. In contrast, India adopted a defensive strategy on the Western front and an offensive strategy on the Eastern front.<sup>2</sup>



*Planning the Operation: Lt Gen Sagat Singh with Maj Gen Krishna Rao, Gp Capt Chandan Singh and Maj Chandrakant Singh*

Source: <https://salute.co.in/4-guards-crosses-the-meghna/>

The 1971 Indo-Pak War also known as Operation "Cactus Lily" was visualized as an old-style war, with set piece attacks on enemy strongholds with the aim to advance up to the Jamuna-Padma in the West and the Meghna in the East. However, evolving circumstances on the battlefield prompted India to pivot towards more agile tactics, characterized by bypassing strongholds to swiftly achieve objectives. These tactical adaptations were refined through discussions among Formation Commanders and simulated war scenarios.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Navy was tasked with implementing a comprehensive blockade of East Bengal ports. Meanwhile, on the Western Front, India primarily adopted a defensive position. Nonetheless, this defensive stance allowed for limited local offensives to keep the adversary off balance and unable to mount a significant assault. Originally, The all-out war was expected to start simultaneously on both Fronts. However, just a few days before the war, India opted against launching an offensive in the West. Consequently, the planned Indian advance in the Chhamb Sector was aborted under the directive of General Sam Manekshaw himself.<sup>4</sup>

## **Eastern Sector**

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<sup>2</sup> Stories of Heroism (PVC & MVC Winner). Dr. BC Chakravorty (1995). Allied Publishers Limited and Ministry of Defence, Government of India

<sup>3</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The Eastern Sector of East Pakistan comprised the territory East of the Meghna River, spanning the Districts of Sylhet, Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Chittagong, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The approach to Dacca, the capital of present day Bangladesh, was via the Meghna, a wide river spanning between 4,000 to 4,500 yards, with the sole crossing point being the railway bridge at Ashuganj, approximately 2,950 feet in length. The terrain, excluding the hill tracts, was predominantly low-lying and prone to waterlogging due to the presence of paddy fields. Like much of Bangladesh, this region is crisscrossed by numerous rivers and drainage channels, making cross-country movement challenging, particularly until early December. Given the unpredictable nature of river courses and associated bridging difficulties, ferries remain the most dependable mode of transportation.



*Pilots of the Helicopter Unit in Special Heli Borne operations*

Source: <https://www.indiatimes.com/explainers/news/helicopters-of-indian-forces-556246.html>

The Sylhet District in the Eastern Sector is characterized by numerous geographical features, including haors (low-lying wetlands), bheels (shallow ponds), perennial lakes with feeder streams, and extensive marshlands. The landscape has high mounds known as tillas, ranging from 100 to 200 feet. These tillas are surrounded by low-lying lands, which remains waterlogged for a significant portion of the year. In the Comilla district, the Lalmai Hills stretch north to southwest of Comilla town, covering an area approximately 16 kilometers long and four kilometers wide. These hills, characterized by low elevation and sparse vegetation, feature numerous peaks. The average height of the range is approximately 225 meters. Regarding transportation infrastructure on the Indian side during the war, a single-track, metre-gauge railway took off from the trans-Assam artery at Lumding and terminated at Dharampur after running a considerable distance close to the Indo-Pakistani border. The stretch between Karimganj and Dharampur is particularly vulnerable to disruptions caused by Pakistani saboteurs. Several attempts were also made by Pakistan to blow up the track at various points, but vigorous security measures, including regular trolley patrols, searchlight specials and tracker dogs.

## **Objective Dacca**

The capture of Dacca was a swift and yet a *magnus* achievement by Indian Military. Indian forces swiftly advanced into Dacca within a two-week timeframe, traversing approximately two hundred kilometers of terrain marked by numerous challenging river obstacles. However, a closer examination reveals intriguing aspects of the Indian progression. However, a closer look reveals some intriguing aspects of the Indian advance. It is noteworthy that the first Indian troops to enter Dacca belonged to a static formation, viz., the 101 Communication Zone Area, and not to one of the three Army Corps launched against East Bengal. No formal directives were issued to any of the Corps Commanders or to the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 101 Communication Zone Area regarding the capture of Dacca. The initial plan for 'Operation Cactus Lily' in August had only envisioned the occupation of specific areas East of the Meghna River and West of the Jamuna-Padma rivers. Additionally, consideration was given to capturing the ports of Khulna and Chittagong to isolate East Pakistan from the sea.<sup>5</sup>

In October, the plan for a parachute drop at Tangail was finalized, aiming to secure Northern territories including Mymensingh, Jamalpur, and Tangail. After a link up with the para battalion dropped at Tangail, the 93 Infantry Brigade of 101 Communication Zone Area was intended to pose a threat to Dacca. However, Eastern Command did not issue any formal directives to its Formation Commanders to this effect. Major General Gandharva Nagra, who assumed command of the 101 Communication Zone Area on 05 December, denied receiving any instructions from Calcutta regarding the capture of Dacca. Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, GOC of the IV Corps, also confirmed that he did not receive orders for the capture of Dhaka. He independently decided to make Dacca his objective and made necessary preparations with the wholehearted cooperation of Group Captain Chandan Singh of IAF.

Lieutenant General Sagat Singh was a key figure in securing victory during the conflict. He executed a bold strategy by deploying infantry units and support elements to seize and fortify bridgeheads across rivers during the assault and capture of Dacca. Among these manoeuvres, the most notable was the Strategic Heliborne Operations (SHBO) conducted across the formidable Meghna River, a move that altered the trajectory of the war. General Singh, a seasoned paratrooper, previously commanded the esteemed 50 (Independent) Parachute Brigade of the Indian Army.<sup>6</sup>

### **Special Heliborne Operations (SHBO)**

The Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 was for the first time in the history of Indian Air Force that Heli-borne operations were mounted during a War. Large scale use of Helicopters facilitated rapid movement of the ground force inside East-Pakistan, with a terrain crisscrossed by rivers and rivulets. These operations proved immensely valuable in facilitating the swift movement of ground forces within East Pakistan, where the landscape was intersected by numerous rivers

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<sup>5</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India

<sup>6</sup> Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War (Accessed on 05 May 2024) [https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/15\\_04\\_Vinod%20Bhatia.pdf](https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/15_04_Vinod%20Bhatia.pdf)

and streams. The Indian Air Force's (IAF) establishment of complete air superiority in the region ensured the safe operation of helicopters.



*IAF Helicopter landing across Meghna*

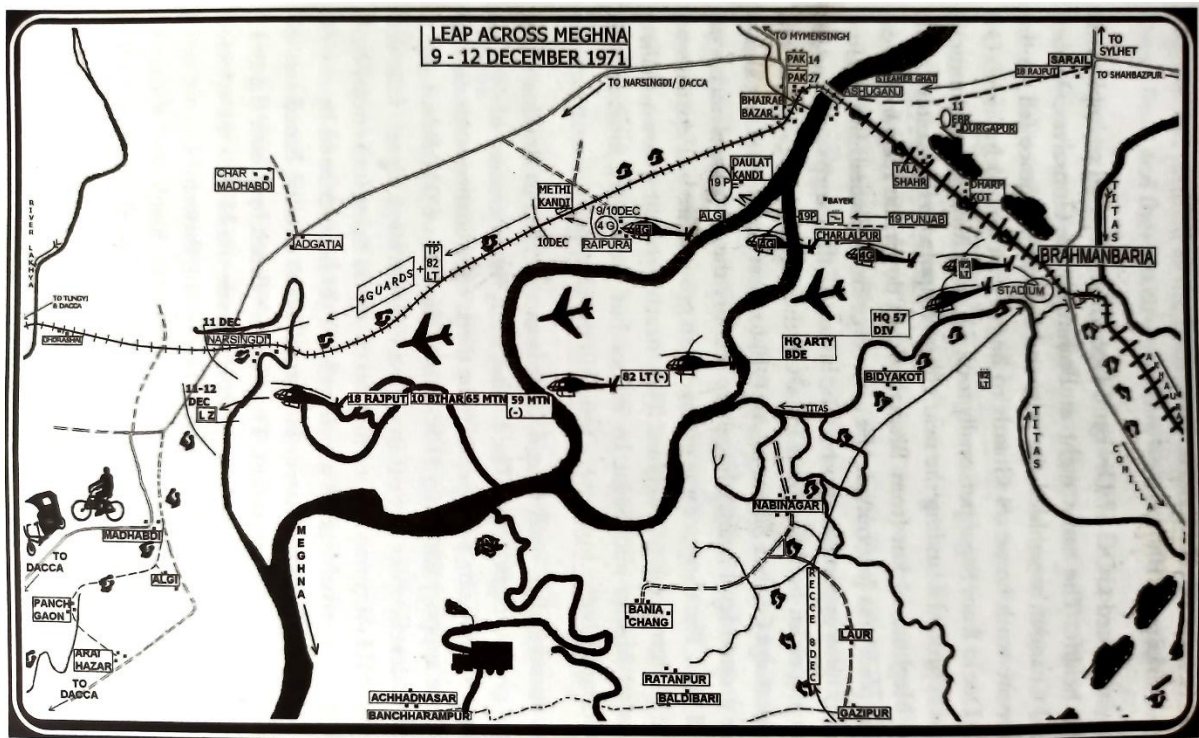
Source: <https://salute.co.in/4-guards-crosses-the-meghna/>

The initial major heli-lift transported over a Company of 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES from Kulaura to Sylhet between 1500 and 1800 hours on 07 December. Despite the directed enemy fire at the helicopters by the Pak troops, the heli-lift operation continued. The operation was temporarily halted in the evening to mitigate the risk of enemy ground fire targeting the illuminated landing zone. Subsequently, a specialized Communication Unit was deployed to facilitate night operations, and the second phase of the heli-lift began at 0300 hours on 08 December. By 0800 hours, the entire Battalion, with the exception of a few Headquarter elements, had been successfully transported. Initially facing moderate enemy fire, later landings encountered intense opposition. Although one helicopter sustained ground fire, it managed to return to Kaliashahar and landed safely. The heli-lift operation to Sylhet continued until the early hours of 09 December, during which time 12 helicopters conducted 66 sorties over 36 hours. In total, 584 troops and 12,500 kilograms of equipment, including weapons and ammunition, were airlifted during this Operation.<sup>7</sup> The Pakistanis, while retreating in the Bhairab Bazar area, blew up the main bridge over Meghna River. Following which, the Indian Army requested air support from the IAF.

### **Crossing of the Meghna**

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<sup>7</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India



### *Leap Across Meghna*

*Source:*

During the War, the fall of Dhaka hinged on the capture of the heavily fortified city of Comilla within the Chittagong Division. By 08 December, the 57 Mountain Division commanded by Major General BF Gonsalves had advanced and secured territories up to the Meghna River. However, the Ashuganj Bridge across the Meghna River posed a significant obstacle. It was crucial to capture, secure, and cross the Meghna river to maintain the advance's momentum. Given the formidable width of the Meghna, reaching 4,000 yards at its narrowest point, any assault across it presented a formidable challenge, both in terms of costliness and time consumption. Meanwhile, the II Corps progress had been impeded by staunch enemy defence at Kushtia. Constructing a new was time consuming and would have endangered the war' time sensitive success amid growing international pressure for a ceasefire, particularly led by the USA.<sup>8</sup>

Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, GOC IV Corps was mulling over possible ways to take the battle across the Meghna. He was well aware of the hazards of a direct assault on Bhairab Bazar across Meghna, with or without the bridge in our hands. By the conventional military practice to mount an opposed river crossing, huge resources in terms of equipment, manpower and firepower were needed. The Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, while hovering over the battle area in his helicopter, learnt that a Pakistani Brigade was withdrawing from Bhairab Bazar towards Sylhet, thus marching out of the War. The Corps Commander

<sup>8</sup> Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War (Accessed on 05 May 2024) [https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/15\\_04\\_Vinod%20Bhatia.pdf](https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/15_04_Vinod%20Bhatia.pdf)

grabbed the opportunity to forge ahead and took a calculated risk and ordered the first heliborne operation in the history of the Indian Army.<sup>9</sup>



*Jawans unloading ammunition from the Helicopter after the landing*

Source: <https://salute.co.in/4-guards-crosses-the-meghna/>

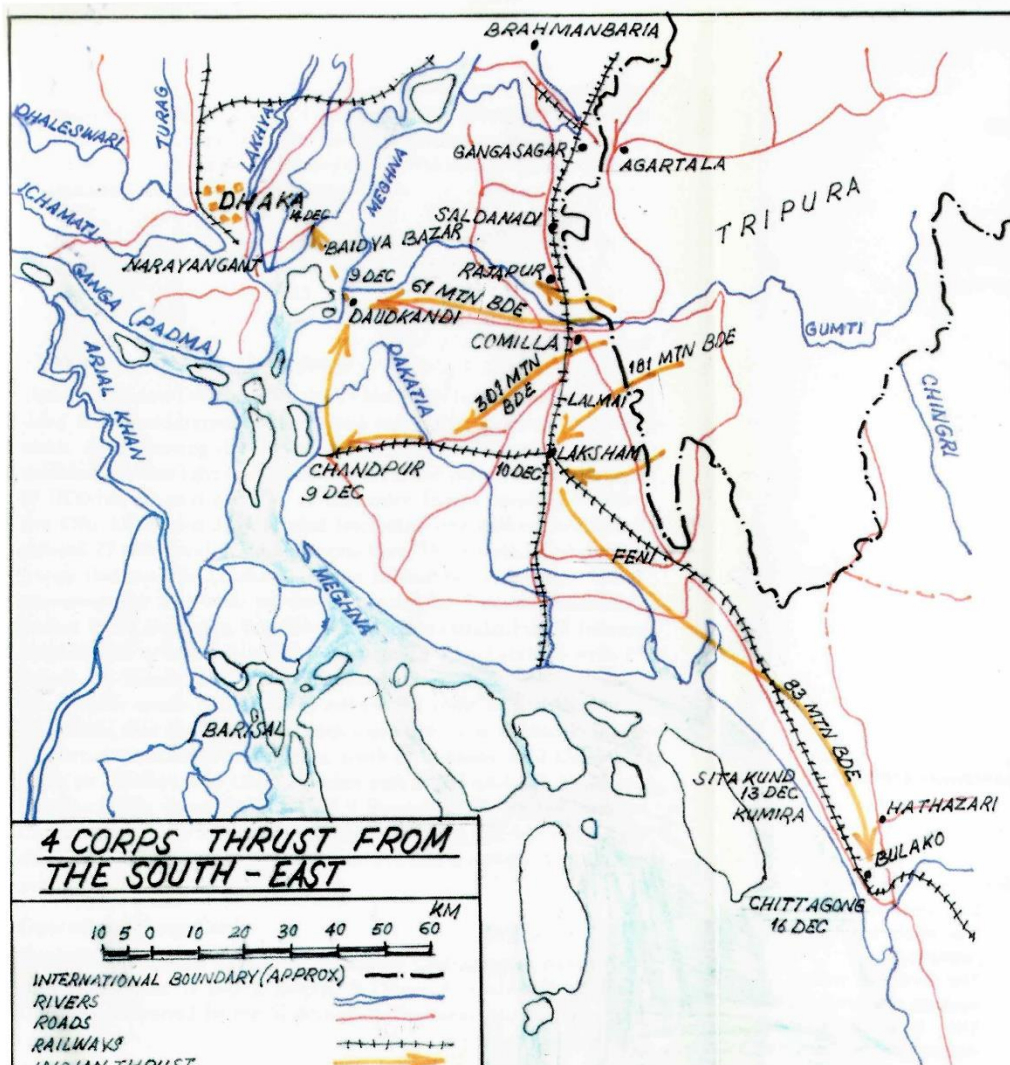
Establishment of helibridge across Meghna was an impromptu plan. Lieutenant General Sagat had already discussed the possibility of employing helicopters with Group Captain Chandan Singh, an equally indomitable airman. And, as it was already tested on 07 and 08 Dec in Sylhet Sector in a successful operation where 4/5 GR was dropped behind the enemy lines in 66 sorties flown by MI4s, Group Captain Chandan Singh supported Lt General Sagat's proposal and handled the Heli-lift operations very competently.

On 09 and 10 December, helicopters again transported 656 fully armed troops and 8,200 kilograms of equipment from Brahmanbaria to Raipura on the West bank of the Meghna. No resistance was encountered on the ground as the Pakistani troops had withdrawn from the area prior to the Indian landings. During the period from 11 to 15 December, the most extensive heli-lift operation was conducted from Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi and from Daudkandi to Baidya Bazar by Joint forces of Indian Army and Indian Air Forces. Eight Mi-4 helicopters executed 164 sorties between 11 to 13 December, transporting 1,350 Armed troops and 40,070 kilograms of weaponry and equipment from Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi. Additionally, a single sortie was flown from Agartala to Narsingdi on 15 December, airlifting four men and 1,200 kilograms of equipment.

### **Heli-Lift to Raipur**

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<sup>9</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India



IV CORPS action during 1971 Indo-Pak War

Source:

On 08 December, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh alerted the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 57 Division to prepare for a heli-lift operation. That same night the plan was finalized, selecting 4 GUARDS commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Himmeth Singh as the first unit to be lifted. On 09 December at 0800 Hours, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh approved a landing site near Raipura village on the Western bank of the Meghna, strategically located outside the artillery range from Bhairab Bazar. The reconnaissance mission led by Lieutenant General Singh himself underscored the unprecedented nature of the operation. On their way back, the chopper, piloted by Captain (later Lieutenant General) Gurbaksh Singh Sihota, encountered ground fire from Pakistani forces near Ashuganj but managed to land safely with 38 bullet holes.<sup>10</sup>

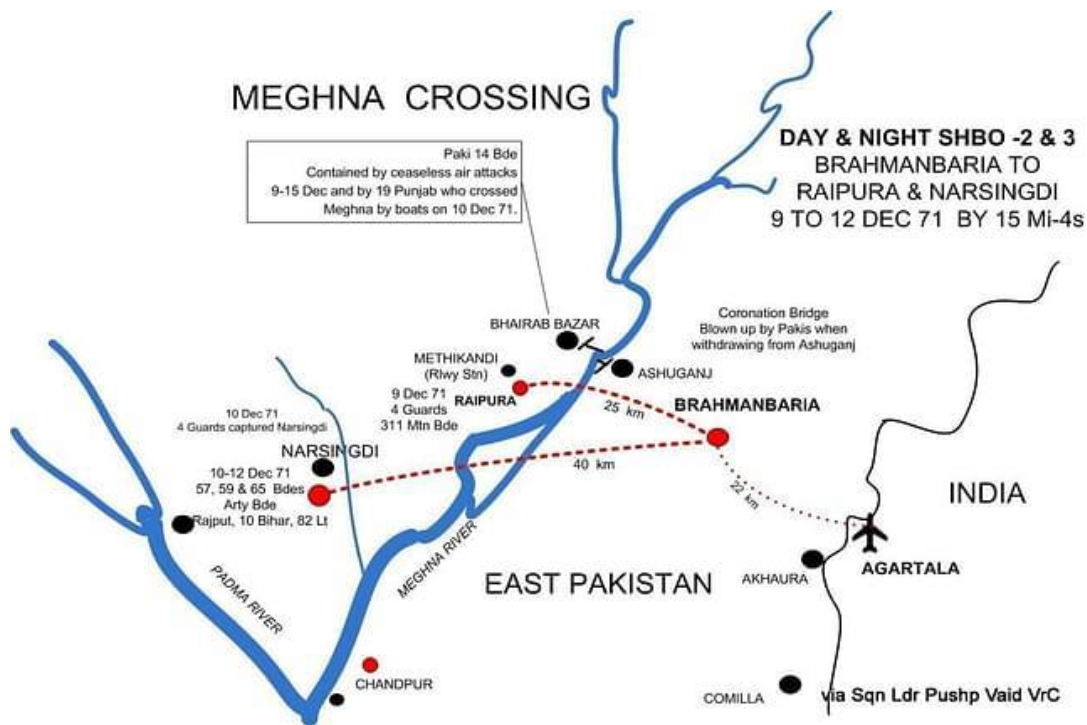
Meanwhile, 4 GUARDS were recalled to Brahmanbaria and rested on 08 December. The Heli-lift commenced from the Stadium in Brahmanbaria on 09 December afternoon. A Cheeta

<sup>10</sup> Leap across Meghna: Blitzkrieg of IV Corps 1971. Brig Onkar Goraya.



helicopter took off first followed by an MI4 to the landing site. The MI-4 carried Lieutenant Colonel Himmeth Singh, Major Chandrakant Singh, and Troops of 'A' Company. The first helicopter landed at Raipur by 1630 Hours. Thereafter, subsequent sorties airlifted the remaining troops with a total of 60 sorties conducted by 0300 Hours on 10 December and successfully transporting the entire battalion along with mortar troops.<sup>11</sup> Despite encountering enemy artillery fire from Bhairab Bazar, the landing site remained unscathed.

Chandrakant's Alpha Company, the first to land, tactically advanced towards Methikanda Railway Station, encountering minimal resistance. It was an important communication link on the Bhairab Bazar-Dacca rail line and river route. However, the Company made contact with enemy defences at Bhairab Bazar. Nevertheless, this engagement was perceived by the enemy as a probing action, deepening their misperception of Indian intentions. On 09 December, 19 PUNJAB of the 73 Mountain Brigade, having moved from Bhatpara to Charlalpur, crossed the Meghna River using country boats provided by local fishermen. Meanwhile, as they engaged Pakistani troops at Bhairab Bazar, 4 GUARDS initiated their advance towards Narsingdi on 0730 Hours on 10 December.<sup>12</sup>



*Map of the crossing of Meghna from Brahmanbaria to Narsingdi of a major part of 4 Corps, just hours after the completion of heli-lift of 4 Guards.*

Indian Air Force also played an important role in keeping Pakistani's occupied at Bhairab Bazar. During this period, Bhairab Bazar remained a focal point for both the Indian Air Force (IAF). The IAF humorously designated Bhairab Bazar as "Practice Range Alpha," with Mynamati being "Range Bravo." Whenever fighter sorties found no substantial targets

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India

elsewhere, they were redirected to these ranges. To prevent the garrison at Bhairab Bazar from resting, two caribou transport aircraft stationed at Agartala were repurposed for bombing missions. Conveyor belts with quick-release switches were attached to convert these aircraft into bombers. Operating at night, one aircraft would approach the target every half hour, dropping five bombs.<sup>13</sup>

### **Buildup at Narsingdi**

Arriving at the railway bridge before Narsingdi, 4 GUARDS engaged in combat to prevent the destruction of the bridge by Pakistani defenders. By 1300 hours on 11 December, 19 RAJPUTANA RIFLES of the 73 Mountain Brigade completed their crossing of the Meghna River, reaching Raipura and coming under the command of the 311 Mountain Brigade. Simultaneously, on the same day, 10 BIHAR, along with one Troop each from the 82 Light Regiment and 65 Mountain Regiment, were airlifted by helicopters and positioned to the South of Satirpara in the Narsingdi Complex. Two Companies of 10 BIHAR, moving Southwards, secured the road and rail crossings across the river on the outskirts of Narsingdi and established a connection with 4 GUARDS, who had earlier secured the jetty area. The 'Sierra' Force, after crossing the Meghna on 11 December, also advanced towards Narsingdi, further bolstering the Indian forces' position in the area.<sup>14</sup> By 0800 Hours on 12 December, 4 GUARDS had secured Narsingdi town after battling against a determined EPCAF Platoon and also a vast area of cut paddy field was selected as the Landing Zone for the rest of 311 Mountain Brigade and the Artillery units.

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<sup>13</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



*Indian Army troops loading IAF's Mi-4 helicopters who was the workhorse of the heli-lift operations in the 1971 war*

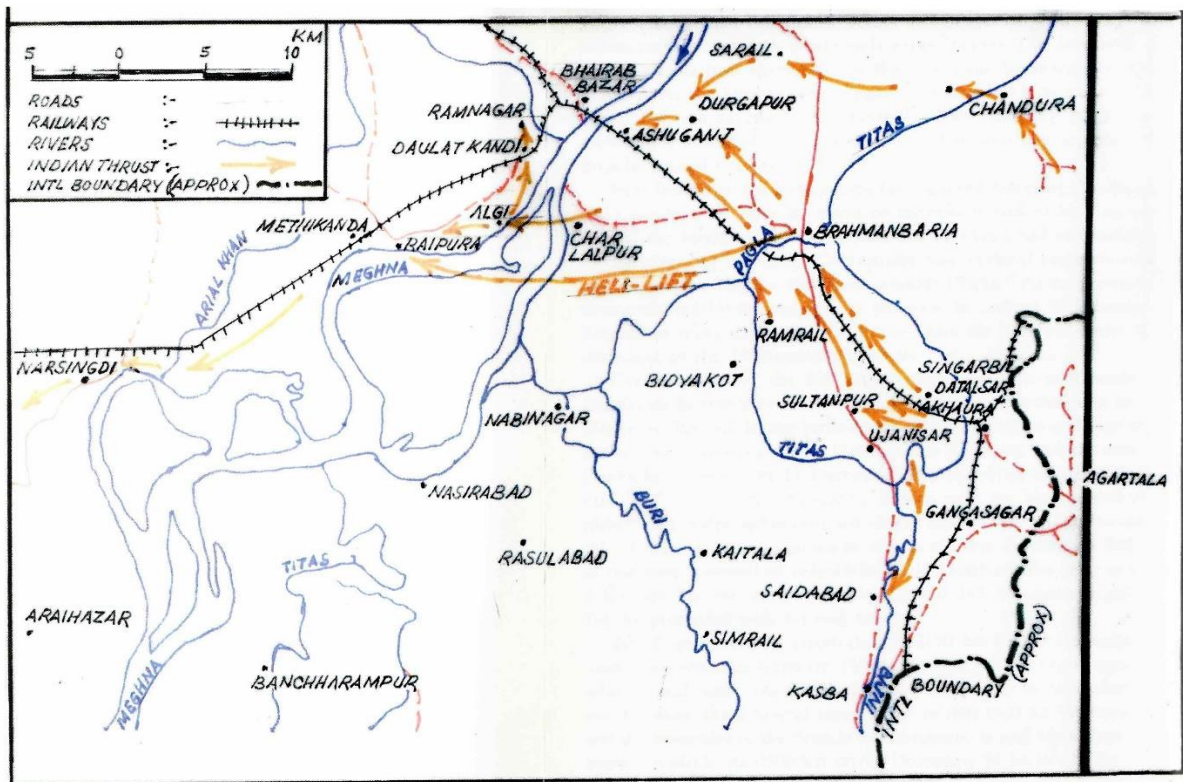
*Source: <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/on-this-day-in-1971-indian-air-force-continued-heli-lift-operations-across-meghna-while-fierce-fighting-raged-in-the-mountains-of-ladakh>*

Encouraged by the success of landings at Raipura, and effectively blocking Pakistan's 14 Infantry Division at Bhairab Bazar, Lieutenant General Sagat Singh decided to build up the remainder fighting force of 57 Mountain Division including the Artillery Brigade across the Meghna. With the successful capture of Narsingdi and the arrival of additional units, including artillery support, the momentum towards Dacca became unstoppable.

57 Artillery Brigade was prioritized as the second lift after the 311 Mountain Brigade less 4 GUARDS. Clear instructions regarding lift priorities were issued, and sorties were allocated accordingly. On 11 December, the 65 Mountain Regiment and the Brigade Headquarters were airlifted. The following day, on 12 December, the 59 Mountain Regiment, less One Troop, and the 82 Light Regiment less One Troop were airlifted. Due to size constraints, all vehicles were left behind, and the guns, being too large for MI4- Helicopters, were dismantled for transport. To reduce weight, steel packing cases of ammunition were discarded, and shells and cartridges were carried by hand. The journey from Brahmanbaria to the Landing Zone was a mere 20 minutes.

On 12 December, 59 Mountain Regiment less One Troop, was airlifted to Satirpara to join the other units of the Division in the Narsingdi area. After securing Narsingdi, 4 GUARDS

advanced to Bulta and Barpa, stopping just eight miles short of Dhaka. The following day, they made contact with Pakistani forces at Kamarghor, situated on the East bank of the Lakhya river. Simultaneously, 10 BIHAR relocated to the Naogaon area, while 19 RAJPUTANA RIFLES secured the Ghorasal Rail Bridge intact on the Narsingdi-Tungi line, across the Lakhya River. On 14 December, upon discovering the absence of Pakistani troops between the Lakhya and Balu Rivers, 'Sierra' Force, accompanied by elements of 10 BIHAR, crossed to the other side of Lakhya River and secured the area between Rupganj and Demra ferry. 73 Mountain Brigade, with 19 RAJPUTANA RIFLES in the lead, then advanced towards Tungi, North of Dacca, and engaged Pakistani positions at Pipulia by 1600 Hours. On the same evening, the 65 Mountain Regiment, operating under the 311 Mountain Brigade, positioned its guns and initiated firing into the heart of Dacca, marking the commencement of direct artillery engagement with the Pakistani forces.



*57 Mountain Division Operations during 1971 Indo Pak-War*

Source:

The establishment of the air bridge across the Meghna by 110 Helicopter Unit was a remarkable feat by the Indian Armed Forces. Overcoming logistical challenges from 07 December to 15 December, the MI-4 helicopters completed a total of 222 sorties between various locations, carrying 2,010 troops and 49,470 kilograms of equipment for the 57 Mountain Division. Moreover, they conducted 187 sorties from Kalaura and Kailashahar to Sylhet and from Daudkandi to Baidya Bazar, transporting 1,793 troops and 50,600 kilograms of weaponry and

equipment.<sup>15</sup> Despite the absence of artillery support for the infantry being airlifted, this audacious plan caught the enemy off guard, marking a bold move against significant odds.

The Meghna Special Heliborne Operation remains one of the most successful airlifts carried out in military history. It gave Indian military an avenue to Dacca and in no time made it possible for them to capture and force Pakistani Armed forces to surrender. The Heli-lift was characterized by operational-level planning with minimal resources, it's swift execution caught the enemy off guard leading to collapse of their defences. This special Heliborne operation under the dynamic leadership of Lieutenant General Sagat Singh and Group Captain Chandan Singh led to eventual and early fall of Dacca.

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<sup>15</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India

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