

## FALL FROM GRACE

By Brig® Mehboob Qadir

After the fall of Jassore in early December 71 the texture of the war in East Pakistan changed decisively for us. Even before the capitulation of the city, Eastern Command had ceased to influence the battle in this sector. They seemed to have left it to the local commanders to decide what to do with the enemy and how to fight their battles where ever they were. Brigade in Kushtia and that in Jassore were practically engaged in their own battles with paralysis having had set in Headquarters 9 Division, Magura early in war. Eastern Command was busy making empty but loud noises about teaching a lesson to the enemy, in the process, making a ludicrous laughing stock of itself. Their antics were not only comical but ridiculous to the nth degree. General Niazi flew in a helicopter to Jassore on 29<sup>th</sup> November in the thick of the battle, duly accompanied by his favorite French female journalist and wanted to address public. Since civil population was unwilling to risk the anger of Mukti therefore some second line troops, razzakars and Albadr/AlShams men were collected in civilian clothes for the address and more importantly for the photo shoot that later appeared in some newspapers I was told. That was his total contribution to the defense of Jassore.

From Jassore all the way, fighting back to Khulna was an epic of a selfless almost Spartan fight to the finish. Every one knew that there was no way that we would ever get out alive from East Pakistan. This retrograde engagement had been full of episodes of superlative bravery, guts and endurance. A few merit a mention to give the flavor of what was taking place there. First we let the uprooted populace fall back to Khulna before actively engaging Indians in battle. The aim was to prevent our civilian casualties as much as was possible.

There was a country road from Satkhira that linked up with Khulna road just behind our first main position after withdrawal from Jassore. The whole area was covered with dense forest. An infantry battalion supported by Mortar guns was deployed to deny that approach to the enemy. There was a raised kidney shaped mound behind which these Mortars were deployed. Captain Faryaad was commanding these weapons. He was a tall, lanky and a simple soul from a village in Hazara. Quite unassuming and rather shy I must say. All of a sudden enemy tanks appeared out of the forest on his flank and began to blast his Mortars with direct tank hits. It was the third Mortar gun that Faryaad was lifting physically out of the gun pit when the Indian tank gunner fired his AP (Armor Piercing) shot from a very close range. Capt Faryaad and the Mortar gun were simply blown to pieces. I don't think any Artillery in the world can produce an example equal to Faryaad's unparalleled sense of duty and fearlessness.

Many days latter we were finally pushed back to Khulna after some very bloody battles at Basantia, Phootala and Daulatpur positions. There was river on one side and lakes surrounded by dense forests on the other side of the road. This was an ideal defensive position which the Indians could neither bypass nor outflank. They had to physically take it to be able to capture Khulna. Behind Khulna was an impassable river delta that emptied

into the Bay of Bengal. All that meant their twin advantage of freedom of manoeuvre and superiority of forces stood neutralized to a large extent. We decided to make our final stand here. The Brigade threw a defensive cordon around Khulna city whose two ends rested on the river and the forested delta.

Captain Arjumand Yar Khand was a young and very handsome, rather feminine, officer from an infantry unit. He was known as the 'baby of the battalion'. He was assigned the task of setting up a strong delaying position ahead of this defensive position to cause as much attrition and loss of time on the advancing enemy as was possible. This officer along with a handful of men held his ground against repeated Indian armor and infantry assaults, hours of air bombing and strafing for nearly three days just as Headquarters Eastern Command was negotiating terms of surrender with Calcutta. On the third day Arjumand's delaying position was overrun after a pitched battle, not a soul returned. That day, probably, on 15<sup>th</sup> December we received orders from Eastern Command to surrender. Brigadier 'Makhmad' Hayat refused to obey this order and we fought on for the next three days till literally the last bullet was left in our rifle chambers.

We were facing 9 Indian Mountain Division whose officers told us the story of the incomparable bravery of Arjumand and his men after the war was over. What happened was that during three days of pitched battle his men were being killed and seriously wounded, machine guns and anti tank guns were being knocked out one after the other but Arjumand and his small force stood fast. On the last day Arjumand was the only one left in the delaying position. His men were either all killed or seriously wounded. Attacking Sikh infantry surrounded his trench and asked him to surrender as he was profusely bleeding from his shattered legs that had probably absorbed a direct Mortar shell hit and in dire need of medical aid. He refused. After a lot of persuasion he finally agreed. With one hand he was lifting his weapon up and with the other he was about to lob a hand grenade when they spotted him and had to kill him. This fearless young officer died fighting extremely bravely; so much so that even the enemy was full of praises for him. They had buried him with honor.

Battle for Khulna was raging furiously and the Indians were trying their utmost to break into our defensive positions. In desperation they had started to bomb densely populated localities while Mukti went a step ahead in brutality. They would bring a few dozen Biharis/Pakistan sympathizers daily to the far bank of the river shout filthy abuses, slaughter them en masse and then dump them in the river. This was a particularly ghastly blood orgy and very telling too. Their blood curdling screams, pleadings for life and extremely desperate attempts to save lives of say a child, a brother, a sister or for that matter any relative were simply maddening. All would invariably be killed.

Our unit positions around Khulna were being adjusted from time to time. The unit defending Satkhira-Khulna Road was under heavy enemy pressure. Along with the Brigade Commander and Commanding Officer we were in their command post when another attack started. Artillery shells and rockets were pouring down like rain. Indian air was strafing relentlessly. Trees were falling all around chopped by artillery and tank fire. There were battle cries of Jai Hind matched by Allah o Akbar all over. There was a

small track leading back out of the forest towards the command post and on that I could see two soldiers coming holding each other. It appeared they were pulling each other in opposite directions. As they came close it transpired that one of them was hit in the shoulder by a bomb splinter and was badly in need of medical aid but didn't want to leave his position, saying " I have been a wrestler and best boxer all my life winning trophies and medals. Now that there is a small wound you want me to leave my trench and buddies under attack .They will think I am scared." The sight was unbelievable as his left shoulder was almost completely severed and dangling with a thin strip of skin.

When bullets are flying in all directions ,bombs and rockets exploding all over ,men are being killed and maimed around you and the enemy tanks are over -running your trenches firing at point blank range; at that moment soldiers make a stand only because of the valor of their officers, personal grit and care for their fellow men and nothing else. Rest everything else becomes secondary ,in fact absolutely redundant. Battle is a true test of a man.

It was the irony of this war that while GOC 9 Indian Mountain Division who defeated us in battle was from one of our units( 6 Punjab) which he always attacked with great ferocity, the opposing Brigade Commander was a pre-partition class fellow of Brigadier Hayat from Military College Jhelum and spoke fluent Pushto. It was I think night 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> December and next day we had to lay down our arms. I had a Bengali battle buddy (batman). He was a young , very faithful and brave little soul and shadowed me everywhere that I went. I asked him to disappear taking advantage of the darkness; he refused. I knew that while we may be protected by the Indian troops he would definitely be hacked to pieces by the hundreds of thousands of Muktis and angry locals gathering around our positions. He refused again. This time I had to be harsh with him and told him 'if you don't go within next five minutes I may have to use my gun.' He looked at me in disbelief ,bent to touch my feet ( an adorable Bengali custom of showing respect to elders) and then reluctantly vanished into the night with tears running down his cheeks. I knew why but I didn't want to console him as that might have broken his resolve to escape. Next morning when we were herded into trucks for departure to Jassore I spotted him perched on a tree with a very gloomy face, behind wildly cheering and abusive mob who were throwing everything and anything on us that they could pick up. We were the butt of public ridicule and pent up anger. By the time our convoy moved out many of us were bleeding or badly hurt by brickbats and all kinds of rubbish hurled at us. This was despite a tight security perimeter set up by the Indian Army around our convoy.

In Jassore we were kept in the same wire fenced enclosure in the cantonment where we used to lock up Muktis and other captured suspects. This probably is what is called irony of the first order. A huge mob had gathered around our cage and were becoming dangerously rowdy. Had they made a determined rush ,the handful of Indian soldiers could not have prevented them from turning us into mashed potatoes and for a good reason. In that wild crowd there was a tall ,slim man in Mukti outfit with a short shaggy beard and battle fatigued face. He stood quietly and looked familiar. Then he walked upto me, and asked in perfectly accented English" Are you Anwaar's brother ?" Instantly I recollected he was a course senior to my brother Major Anwaar Mohiud Din in PMA and

was very friendly. I said ‘Yes sir ,I know you.You were his senior and friend”.He came close and said “ I am the Area Mukti Commander, why didn’t I know you were here?Perhaps you must have joined recently” He went on to say “ I am extremely sorry to see you people in this miserable condition but West Pakistanis are responsible for this tragedy. We will regret having sought Indian help.” And then he melted into the crowd.By then my brother had been killed in battle in Pasrur Sector as I learnt upon my repatriation three years latter.I am told my parents received the twin news of my brother being killed in the line of duty and I ‘missing in action ‘ with great poise and composure.May their souls rest in peace and Allah be as kind to them as they were to us when we were young and infirm.

Meanwhile Indians were busy pulling out and dismantling everything from doors and windows to Karnaphulli Paper Mills.From flower pots to electricity and telephone poles and whatever they could lift they did ,loaded up in all kinds of transporters and carried it to India. They literally robbed and emptied Bangla Desh of all its valuables.I have never seen a nation being ripped off so systematically and so thoroughly.Mukti Commander was right in regretting to seek Indian help to get rid of us.In the process they paid a very heavy price financially, politically and materially.On the other hand,the vital fundamentals of Pakistan were shaken to the very core.The myth of an over arching common bondage between the two wings suffered a fatal blow and snapped.