

## *Hectic days in Halwara (Getting ready for war) -1*



**Tapas Kumar Sen**

Tapas Sen was born in Kolkata (1934), and brought up in what now constitutes Bangladesh. He migrated to India in 1948, and joined the National Defence Academy in January 1950. He was commissioned as a fighter pilot into the Indian Air Force on 1 April 1953, from where he retired in 1986 in the rank of an Air Commodore. He now leads an active life, travelling widely and writing occasionally.

*Editor's note: This is an edited version of a set of articles that originally appeared on Air Commodore Sen's blog [TKS' Tales](#). It is reproduced here with the author's permission.*

### Reaching Halwara Air Force Station: 02 December 1971

In October 1971, I was an Indian Air Force Wing Commander, Directing Staff at the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), Wellington.

I was expecting a stork to arrive, and my dear wife, Leena, was not in the best of health; I was plenty worried. Ultimately, on 29 October 1971, our new baby arrived. There was joy and excitement, and there was pressure of home administration. All my four other children decided fall ill at the same time. My house became a hospital, and I am not using that expression as a turn of the phrase. The Officer Commanding of the Military Hospital found it easier to nominate a nurse for full time duties in the Sen household than to admit one infant plus four other kids plus the mother into the hospital itself.

I do not know how four weeks passed.

On 29 November 1971, there was no rush to get to the office. The College was in between courses, and the Directing Staff were left to their own devices. I was about to finish my breakfast when the doorbell rang. The messenger carried a signal addressed to the DSSC Air Wing.

The message was short. It was about Operation Cactus-Lily. I had not heard about that code but it sounded quite ominous. It directed my fellow Directing Staff Wing Commander S K (Polly) Mehra and me to report to HQ Western Air command and Eastern Air Command respectively 'Immediately'. (Polly Mehra rose to be the Chief of the Air Staff, 1988-1991.)

I walked down to the College and visited the 'Q' Staff. A few telephone calls revealed that there were no seats available on the flight ex Coimbatore that evening. Polly settled for a Coimbatore-Bangalore-Kolkata routing to Shillong for the next day. I found the Bangalore-Delhi sector fully booked for the next two days. A seat was however available on the Madras-Delhi sector on the evening flight on 30<sup>th</sup> November; I picked that one up. Having done all this, I walked back home.

As I entered through the front door, Leena called out from upstairs, "So what was the signal all about?"

Realisation dawned on me slowly. How hard must it be for a girl to be married to a Fauji! Here was Leena, sitting upstairs, cradling a one-month-old baby, and looking after four other kids all of whom were in bed with some ailments or the other. And here I was – fixing up travel plans to go off to a shooting war in about the next couple of hours!

She did not know yet. I had not told her. I walked up slowly, and told her that I would be leaving for Delhi as soon as we had lunch. She looked up at me, and asked, "It is war, isn't it?" I could only nod in assent.

We had our lunch. My little bag was set. Wing Commanders Kunhiraman and Babi Dey came over to assure me that the Air Wing of the DSSC would provide Leena all the support she needed. A car arrived to take me down to Mettupalayam. The Nilgiri Express brought me to Madras.

A car from Tambaram took me home to the Anchorage, the abode of my *Chitti* (Aunt), Mrs Rukmini Rajagopal. Breakfast, a little gossip, lunch and an hour of rest floated over the hidden tears of *Chitti*. She had lost her brother, and then her son, J Vijayaraghavan, to Air Force air crashes. Now I, her own emotional replacement for her lost son, was going off to an impending war. No amount of my assurance that I was unlikely to be used for active flying because of my seniority and lack of flying practice could calm her down. But of course, I had to go.

I was at Palam airport in Delhi before dinner, and in Subroto Park (Headquarters of the Western Air Command) early in the morning of 01 December 1971.

It was a strange kind of feeling for me there in the office of Operations 1A at HQ Western Air Command. It was my old office. Many of the clerical staff were from my time in that office. Squadron Leader V Mathur was now holding the post of Operations IB, instead of Squadron Leader J L Bhargava (aka Brother) who had held that post under me. My chair was still occupied by (now) Group Captain Man Singh, the chair having been upgraded yet again. At the adjoining door, the chair of Air I was now being filled by my former boss, Timki Brar, as an Air Commodore.

There was an air of hustle and bustle in the air. Everyone was busy. Groupie Man was moving in and out of the office room, unable stop for a moment and say hello. After a few futile attempts, I ultimately corralled him in his chair. "Where are you sending me?"

Groupie Man looked back at me with a frown. He was a straightforward man who did not like to indulge in imprecise words. "I do not know," he said. His irritation was visible. It was obvious that he was trying to avoid discussion on the subject. I did not much care for his reluctance to talk. "Manji, you sent for me and I came running. Now please tell me where I am to go."

Groupie Man relented a little. "We had planned to send you to Pathankot when the balloon goes up, to work with Baba Katre there." I was overjoyed. Fighting a war with Baba Katre, my former Squadron Commander whom I revered, would be a dream come true for any fighter pilot of my seniority.

"When do I go?"

Groupie Man held his hand up. "All that has changed," he said. "The C-in-C visited Pathankot day before yesterday. He was very disappointed. He removed the base commander and the chief operations officer from their posts. Baba Katre was positioned there straight away. Since you were not here at that moment, we sent Dolly Yadav as his Chief Operations Officer (COO) in your place."

I was really disappointed, but such things happen in life. Now what?

Groupie Man's irritation had disappeared. There are many things to be done. "Just relax for a while; you will get to do something worthwhile," he said. The busy man was out of his chair once again, and rushed out to douse some other fire somewhere else.

I sat around in my old office, and got bored. After the lunch break, I decided to drop in and pay my respects to Boss Timki. He had certainly put on some fat in the intervening years since we had last met, but he had not changed in his manners at all. As I walked in to his office, he got out of his chair, walked around his table, and greeted me effusively.

At the same moment, his red telephone jingled, and he had to pick it up. I was half-tempted to leave as I was really not authorised to eavesdrop on a conversation on the red phone, but I just hung on. The

conversation was one-sided consisting mostly of “Yes Sir’s” from Timki’s side. He put the phone down, led me to the sofa, and sat down. Motioning to the red phone, he said, “That was the Vice Chief.”

I was amazed with the ease with which Boss Timki let me fill him up with my previous two decades or so that had passed since I had last served under him. In 1953, I was a mere Flying Officer in the squadron he was commanding. After a chat of mere fifteen minutes, it seemed that we had never been away from each other at all.

Back at the office of Ops 1A, the afternoon wore on. At about four o’ clock, Groupie Man’s phone rang as he came back to his office from one of his quick dash outside. It was a call from Group Captain Chandu Gole, who was commanding Air Force Station Halwara. He wanted a replacement for his COO immediately. Wing Commander J C Sabherwal (Sabhi) was his COO, who had been forced to eject from a Su 7 a few days ago, and had suffered spinal injuries in the process. The doctors had just told Chandu that Sabhi was not likely to return to work in a hurry; hence the request for a replacement.

Groupie Man looked at me. “I can send Tiku Sen to you. Is that OK?” Chandu must have said OK. Groupie Man put the phone down, and said to me, “It is Halwara for you.”

Instantly I was on my feet. I will take a bus tonight, I said. Groupie Man motioned me to sit down. The roads of Panjab are filled with military traffic. Do not add to my problems. I will airlift you tomorrow.

Next morning I came to work, ready with my packed bag, but it seemed that there was no airlift to be had. By about midday, I suggested that I could take the Air HQ Communications Squadron Harvard myself. Some youngster could come with me, and bring the aircraft back. But, there was no one ready to fly the ancient lumbering Harvard! The idea was dropped.

At long last, I could tie up with a 41 Squadron Otter going back to Adampur leaving at 1400 hrs. I got on to that aircraft, and landed at Halwara with sunlight fading on the horizon.

It was 02 December 1971. I was now at an active air station ready for war.

Groupie Gole had come down to the tarmac himself to pick me up. I stepped down the extended ladder, pulled my suitcase behind me and ran out of the cold slipstream to the Station Commander’s Jeep.

Groupie Gole was happy to see me. We had never worked together, except for one evening in 1953, when his farewell from and my welcome into 1 Squadron had coincided. However, the Air Force was a very small place in our young days, and we had met many times under varied circumstances. Now, however, we were going to fight a war together.

We drove out of the tarmac, and stopped for a cup of *chai* with Alan D’Costa in his temporary wartime dispersed location. Alan was now commanding 222 Squadron (the Tiger Sharks) on Su7 aircraft. Alan was from the 61<sup>st</sup> pilot’s course. We had worked together briefly in 1954 when we were tasked to test, accept, and put away to storage the newly built HT2 aircraft from HAL (Hindustan Aircraft Limited) on behalf of the Air Force.

After quick refreshments with the Tiger Sharks, we made our way in to the Station Commander’s office. “Your first job is to become familiar with the war orders,” Groupie Gole said. He opened his classified locker, took out a fairly large order book, and placed the orders on the table. I accepted his direction symbolically by placing my right hand on the orders, but I made no attempt either to pull it towards me or to open it.

“Yes Sir,” I said. “But first I’d like to hear your summary of the current situation.”

Groupie Gole looked at me with his light grey/brown eyes and captured my gaze. After a short silence, he spoke very softly and deliberately, “There will be a war. We shall not fire the first shots. But, once it starts, we shall strike such a severe blow to the Pakistani war machine that they won’t dare think of a war again for at least twenty-five to thirty years.”

When I think back to those moments now, I wonder how precise he was, and in hindsight, how prescient!

I was left alone in the office of the station commander as I delved into the orders. The orders were very well written, and were quite detailed. As I read on, the over-all national perspective took shape in my mind. We were not interested in capturing territory on the Western front or seeking a total capitulation of Pakistan. We were to fight a defensive–offensive war, protecting our territory and assets, and destroying war assets of the enemy to the extent possible.

The aims and objectives on the Eastern front were not recorded in the book I read. I presumed that there a complete victory for us, and a total capitulation for Pakistan would be our aim.

After about eight in the evening, someone brought food for me. I ate a hurried dinner, and got back into my research. I had to have a very clear perspective of the forces allocated to the base, and its relationship with the war tasks allotted. I had to understand the defence plan, the offensive plan, the logistic plan, the security and counter-intelligence plan and the station’s routine administrative plan. It was about two in the morning when I was done with my first read.

Just as I was about to close up the book in front of me, Groupie Gole arrived back into his office. Was I done with the orders? Yes. Was I tired or sleepy? No.

“Well,” he said, “in that case, let us sit down and do some planning.”

I readjusted my chair and faced him. His directives were crisp. I was to be his number two, and be ready to run the station, if he was not there. I should therefore familiarise myself with every activity of the station, and the current instructions given to each section commander. I should have no doubts whatsoever about how he had planned to run the station at wartime, and I should reach that state as soon as possible. Do whatever needs to be done to get there.

I should take charge of base airspace control, base air defence, base Passive air defence, base ground defence, and base intelligence and counter intelligence. The other jobs, especially offensive operations and special operations, base administration, base logistics, base maintenance, and base battle damage repair would be handled by him with his staff. I was therefore to make myself knowledgeable about the resources and personnel allocated for my tasks immediately. The tasks given were clear and concise, even if somewhat challenging. I debated within myself whether I should consider the tasks to be ‘daunting’ and decided against it.

At the end of his directions, Groupie Gole got up and took me along to show me the base air defence communication centre. It was a fresh dugout in the wilderness of the airfield area, protected with embankments, and covered from the top. It was not very large. It had three compartments arranged functionally. The whole structure was well camouflaged. A short distance away, a similar dugout contained a standby power supply generator. Also close by was an observation tower that looked like an ordinary perimeter watchtower.

The centre was the hub of all communication necessary for me to command and control the air defence assets. A very neat arrangement of display concentrated all available information on a vertical board that presented the base airspace and air defence situation visually and instantly. It was also directly connected to all AD (Air Defence) offensive assets by multiple radio and landline voice channels.

The setup was neat and extremely functional. It made me very happy. Groupie Gole was also very proud of the centre. It had come up under his direct supervision, and contained many innovative ideas traceable directly to him. We took about two hours to examine every part of the centre and understand the underlying concepts.

It was now about four in the morning. Groupie Gole said, “Let us go and get a little shut-eye.”

My bag was still lying in the station commander’s office. We went back, picked it up and drove to the mess. We were met by an alert staff. I was led directly to a neat room labelled with my name, containing a

clean bed and a jar of drinking water. I was impressed by the effective administration without any fuss or delay. It was a clear indication of a well-run station. I changed my clothes and fell asleep in seconds.

### 03 December 1971

When I was awakened with a steaming cup of tea, it was 7 o'clock on the misty dawn of 03 December 1971.

Out of bed, I dressed quickly. I was in my Base Air Defence Centre (BADC) bunker by 7:30 am. The place was fully alive. The change of shift had taken place. The boys were on 14-hour shifts, with an hour of overlap at each changeover.

Squadron Leader Gopal Krishna Arora was my assistant at the BADC. A navigator commissioned in April 1955, he was slightly elder in his seniority group. A serious-minded and sincere officer, he was currently employed in the Surface to Air Guided Weapons (SAGW) environment. Therefore, he was fully conversant with all the needs and skills to run a BADC. We knew each other socially. I was very comfortable in his being my number two for the BADC.

Breakfast was delivered at work, and consumed with no fuss. I now needed to apply myself to get to know all my assets and challenges for the tasks allotted to me.

Leaving Gopal in charge of the BADC, I decided to start with the element of air defence systems I was least familiar with. Two AD Artillery (AD Arty) units were deployed on the airfield. One unit operated L-60 guns that were totally manual, and the other unit operated L-70 guns supported by a Super Fledermaus radar.

I visited both the units, and learned about their operating procedures. I had to specially ensure that there was no gap in my understanding of their interface with the BADC. Though theoretically I had had enough instructions imparted to me about AD Arty and its interface with the Air Force AD environment, this would be first time I would actually control AD Arty assets in a real war situation. I learnt a lot in those two hours.

My next area of interest was the SAGW squadrons. There were two squadrons deployed around the airfield. Both were equipped with SA-2 missiles. As it would be clear to those of my readers who are familiar with missile based air defence, two units are not really enough for a 100 % cover of a point to be protected. Two units can provide only the bare minimum security to the point. Unfortunately, one can seldom have all the assets that one needs.

The other problem with the SA-2 units was that these missiles were designed for intercepting high-level targets. However, our threat was from very low-level targets, where the kill zones of the SA-2 missiles shrank to almost insignificance. In 1971, however, we had no other missile defence available.

My knowledge about SAGW was somewhat better than my knowledge of AD Arty, having been exposed to its weaknesses and strengths at the staff level. I went down to one of the units, and refreshed my knowledge of the procedures for engagement by an SAGW. I also spoke to the other squadron commander on phone. As I was pressed for time, I did not visit the squadron physically.

Halwara had a Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) system installed. The radar of the GCA system had been integrated into the BADC as the base air space radar. I went down to the CGA, and refreshed my knowledge about this radar and its limitations. In 1971, BEL (Bharat Electronics Limited) was in the process of developing a 3D radar called the S-1000. One of these radars was installed on the airfield for field trials at that time. Though the radar had not been declared as 'operational' at that stage, we had it linked up to the BADC as a stand-by to the base radar.

Our main radar cover was provided by the Air Defence Sector HQ at Barnala. Group Captain K T Abraham was commanding that outfit. We had known each other for a long time. I called him up, and informed him that I had taken over the BADC at Halwara. We worked out a mutual rapport immediately.

By now, the lunch hour was approaching. I made my way to the Air Defence Aircraft units. Halwara was home to No 9 Squadron (Wolf Pack), which was mounted on Gnats. The unit was being commanded by Wing Commander Karan Yadav, who happened to be the elder brother of my friend Dolly Yadav. Karan was a test pilot of repute. He was commanding a squadron rather late in his life because he had been busy with testing duties in his younger days.

I have always been a great fan of the Gnat especially in the high subsonic speeds at low-level, just the place we were going to battle in. The squadron boys were a young lot. I went to the crew room, and sat with them for some time. In my general discussion with the boys there, I got an impression that these boys were not oozing with confidence about their aircraft, unlike what I remembered was the crew-room mood in 23 Squadron in 1964.

This caused me some concern. I went and saw Karan, and mentioned my recent impression. To my utter surprise, Karan said that my impression was correct. He justified the mood of his boys by saying that missile armed F-104s and MiG 19s would outclass the Gnat, and his boys justifiably felt that they were handicapped by their aircraft. I disagreed with him entirely, but I could not ignore the considered opinion of an active squadron commander. It made me very unhappy.

My final call for the morning was to the detachment of MiG21s from the Black Archers (47 Squadron). I used to be Archer One till just a year ago, and I felt an emotional attachment to the unit. I found my old flight commander, Bharat Kumar as the OC detachment. The unit had sent two aircraft, four pilots and a small 'First Line Only' servicing party. Apart from Bharat, there were Neelu Malik and Sukhi Singh from my time in the unit. The fourth pilot was K B Singh, who must have joined the Archers more recently. Archers were in high spirits as usual, and I shared a hearty lunch with them.

I still had a lot of work to do before the day ended. I looked into the BADC, where I found everything running smoothly under Gopal Arora. I then visited the station HQ to obtain a full brief on Passive Air Defence (PAD) and Ground Defence. Squadron Leader Bandyopadhyaya (Bando) was the officer in charge of PAD and Ground Defence. He was also the station adjutant.

I went into the station commander's office, met Groupie Gole, and updated him about all that I had done since the morning. Groupie Gole was about to leave his office, and he needed the adjutant with him for his visit. He came out of his office and headed for the adjutant's room. He said that he could not spare Bando for the next hour or so. I should wait in his office and familiarise myself with the currently active files on his table till Bando is back in an hour. Bando came out of his office with his cap on ready to move out. A young lady in a maroon sari came out of the room behind Bando. Groupie introduced her to me as Mrs Bandyopadhyaya, and rushed out with Bando on his trail.

I ran after them. "Sir," I pleaded, "With Bando away with you, who will show me the files?" By now, Groupie Gole was in the driver's seat of his jeep while Bando was clambering up on the left. "Sit down in my office," Groupie said. "Mrs Bando will help you."

His jeep pulled out, leaving me dumbfounded. I had heard of innovations, and I knew about making use of all available resources. But I had never heard of an officer's wife being authorised to handle classified files! An adjutant's wife double banking him at the office during a war? Wow! I went back to the station commander's office, and sat down, somewhat confused.

Air Force office files are of two major varieties: Policy Files and Correspondence Files. Within this broad grouping, files are segregated by departments such as /P for Personnel, /ADM for administration, /ORG for organisation, /DISP for discipline, and so on.

Within a few moments of my sitting down, Mrs Bando started bringing in files neatly arranged and ordered, and stacked them on my table. I was forced to admire her efficiency and poise. However, I was uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable about the fact that she seemed to have free access to all Secret and

Confidential files. I was uncomfortable with the fact that she was knowledgeable about the contents of the files. I was uncomfortable because I did not know what her standing in the office was.

Apparently, I must have been a simpleton whose discomfort showed up on his face. Having stacked the files on my table, she stood facing me and smiled. "Sir," she said, "I am not here as Mrs Bandyopadhyaya. I am also Flying Officer Padma, a Medical Officer, and I am functioning as the stand-by adjutant." I must have looked foolish with a half-embarrassed smile, but I was hugely relieved. (I should have known then that I was dealing with an exceptionally brilliant officer. She went on to become the first lady Air Marshal of the Indian Air Force, and retired as the Director General of Air Force Medical Services!)

Bando was back from his trip in forty-five minutes or so. I was through with my rapid once-over of the files by about an hour. Bando then took me around the airfield showing me the PAD and Ground Defence *bandobast* (logistics and arrangement).

I was impressed with the detail of dispersal, camouflage and concealment orders. Orders about blackout and night movements were also very clear. The camouflage of the station, including the painting of the runway was impressive, and it was quite difficult to spot the airfield from the air. For Ground Defence, we had a company of regular infantry and two companies of Defence Services Security Corps (DSSC). These were supplemented by armed airmen guards at static posts. The boundary fence had been upgraded and repaired, and the perimeter road for patrolling was in good order. Watchtowers all along the perimeter were functional with lights and communication connected. The situation made me happy. I also met and talked with the Major in charge of the troops.

It was time again for a peep-in into the BADC. I found everything running smoothly there. Ever since I came to Halwara, some selfish thoughts had been playing around in my mind. I had been in the Air Force for eighteen years, and I had not had the opportunity to fire a gun in anger or drop a bomb on an enemy even once.

Now I was approaching middle age. I would be 38 in six months' time! I had already completed my tenure as a squadron commander. Therefore, my likelihood of any more active flying was remote. Now I was on a hot base. My only chance of sneaking in any operational flying would be to get in into one of the strike missions once the initial skirmish was over. For that to happen, I had to be current on the Su7, and I was not even converted (trained and authorised to fly) on it!

The desire to sneak into action overcame me. I went down to the Tiger Sharks, and got hold of Alan D'Costa to wangle a quick conversion for me on the Su7. Alan had no problem with that idea. He gave me a copy of the pilot's notes, and a copy of the technical training notes. I found a quiet corner, picked up a cup of chai, and wrapped myself into those two books.

I do not know how much time had passed. I suddenly found Groupie Gole walking in and talking to Alan. Finding me in that very studious posture, he squinted hard at me, and asked me what I was reading. Alan stepped forward and explained my desire to convert onto the Su7.

Groupie fixed his eyes on me and stepped forward. "I shall say this only once so you better listen to me carefully. You have had access to the complete war plans. You are automatically barred from flying across enemy lines till the war is over. As a result, any flying effort to convert you to Su7 would be infructuous and cannot be authorised. You are grounded till further orders."

That was that. My wings were firmly clipped. It was useless even to feel sorry for my vanishing heroic dreams. I put the books back to their shelves and ordered another round of tea. Soon, it was six o'clock in the evening. ❖