

Hectic days in Halwara (The war begins) -2



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03-04 December 1971

Unknown to us, at that moment, the balloon had gone up. At 1740 hrs on the evening of Friday 03 December 1971, Pakistan Air Force mounted a raid on Srinagar airfield. Attacks on other airfields followed. **The war of 1971 had started.**

I was still to finish my second cup of tea with the Tiger Sharks when the news came in. It was just after six in the evening of 03 December 1971. The information was rather vague. It seemed that a raid on Srinagar had taken place a few minutes earlier. At the crew room, the news did not create any flutter. There had been too many rumours in the recent past that had turned out to be false.

Within a few more minutes however, Group Captain (Groupie) Gole drove up. Alan D'Costa and I were standing in front of the unit. We moved to the station commander's jeep as it stopped. Groupie was at the wheel, as usual. There was a faint smile on his lips and a sparkle in his eyes. "It is on," was all he said. "They have struck our forward airfields. We strike back at first light tomorrow."

There was no sign of any tension anywhere. Instead, there seemed to be great relief that the long period of waiting was finally over.

I made a move towards the Base Air Defence Centre (BADC) but the Groupie stopped me. "Wait, I shall also come down," he said. Turning to Alan, he asked him to send the boys off for rest, and to report back at four o'clock next morning. The other strike squadron, 108 (Hawkeyes) flying Su7 under Dada Deshmukh, had already been given similar instructions by the station commander.

We then went down to the BADC. At the BADC, Gopal was in a state of excitement. All India Radio had just announced the strikes by Pakistan. The PM had said that she considered these strikes to be a declaration of war, and that India would act accordingly.

All my boys were at their stations. There were no signs of any panic. On the contrary, there was intense concentration on the job at hand. Groupie hung around for some time, and then went away. We were not supposed to be together as far as possible, now that the war had actually started!

Very soon, the change of shift was under way. With the news of the war, every one tended to hang around and crowd the workspace. I had to really drive the day shift guys out to allow normal work to continue. By about seven in the evening, we had all settled down.

In bits and pieces, the details of the evening's operations filtered in to form a clear picture. The Pakistanis had attempted a 'Pre-emptive Strike'. They had decided to carry out a 'strike at last light' by their fighter-

bomber force. At this time, the defending ability of the Indian day air-defence fighters would become insignificant. None of the three main air-defence aircraft of India – the Gnat, the Hunter, and the MiG21 – had any low-level non visual interception capability, while an attacking ground attack aircraft could put in a strike in fading daylight conditions.

Their first strike came over Srinagar at 1740 hrs. It was followed by an attack over Pathankot at 1750, and Amritsar at 1805. The fighter-bombers had not ventured into defended inland targets like Adampur, Halwara, Ambala or Barnala. However, there were reports of some fighter aircraft attacking insignificant targets close to the border and going back. We were not sure whether such attacks were a display of heroism by the Pakistan Air Force, or a display of poor intelligence/target-selection.

Very soon, the airspace became alive with our own air activity. Indian Canberra bombers were setting out on their retaliatory strikes. I was not directly involved in these moves. None of these aircraft was planned to transit through my defended base air space. However, I had to remain alert, and not allow a hostile entry into my airspace while our own strikes were on way. The Air Defence Sector HQ at Barnala was calmly tracking our strikes on their own way out. I held the Archer Section in readiness. No threat developed for the base for the next couple of hours.

All India Radio had started a chain of short news bulletins. It was announced that the Prime Minister would address the nation at midnight. It was also announced that Pakistan had raided other airfields like Uttarlai and Nal (Bikaner), near the border.

Gopal and I were both at the command post. I suggested to Gopal that he might like to take a little rest break while I held the fort. However, Gopal was not sleepy at all. He decided to hang around. By eight, dinner was supplied, and all of us ate our meal in peace. It was looking more like a well-rehearsed exercise than a serious war!

By about nine pm, Barnala scrambled the Archer section, perhaps as a precautionary cover for our bombers returning from raid. However, even for these, no threat developed. Neelu Malik and his wing man (K B Singh) returned after a routine Combat Air Patrol (CAP), and landed back.

Halwara station gets bombed

Barnala alerted us about the likelihood of a threat, just short of eleven thirty pm. Two tracks at low-level had been picked up. It was possible that Halwara could be their target. The aircraft were painting well (were clearly visible on the Radar Screen) and they were flying quite low. It was felt that MiG 21 Type 77 would not be effective against such a target. The Archers, though re-fuelled and ready, were not launched.

Barnala was giving me a running commentary about the possible threat. The two aircraft were approaching from the southwest. Flying low, they bypassed Halwara, and headed for Ludhiana. By now, my Visual Observation Posts (VOPs) and Mobile Observation Posts (MOPs) had come alive.

The first local call came from the civil defence control room, Ludhiana. Two aircraft had over flown the town, and had turned south. Quite obviously, they were trying to follow the canal to reach Halwara from the east. This was an expected technique, and I had saturated that approach with VOPs. I kept on getting a second-by-second report of where the planes were. At 23:38, Barnala declared Halwara as threatened, and I sounded the air raid siren.

I ordered 'Guns Tight' for the AD Arty units. For these guns, I had three states of alert. Topmost state was 'Hold Fire', under which the guns were not to fire at any aircraft under any circumstances. I brought the guns to this state, when I recovered friendly aircraft to the base. The next state was 'Guns Tight', under which the guns were prohibited from opening up unless they were being attacked, and the attacking aircraft was identified as hostile. The third state was 'Guns Free'. At this state, the guns were free to engage any aircraft they found within their range. They were however cautioned against wasteful expenditure of ammunition, and were asked not to fire unless they had a target firmly in their sights.

I was now under a threat. No friendly aircraft were airborne within my airspace. It should have been logical therefore to go to ‘Guns Free.’ However, it is well known that under actual attack, gunners tend to fire indiscriminately. This fire discloses the location of the defended area, and an attacking aircraft is aided in making last-minute corrections to his bombing run. I had no inclination of disclosing the location of the airfield. The airfield was well camouflaged and concealed. Night visibility was not very high. Hence, ‘Guns Tight’ was a better option.

Both the SAGW units had also been alerted, and their search radar had picked up the hostile tracks. However, the aircraft were too low and were outside the kill zone of both the units. I placed the missiles under the state of ‘Sky is Clear’, which empowered them to engage any flying object within their kill zone.

By 23:42, four minutes after the alert, the hostile aircraft entered my defended zone. They had obviously not spotted the airfield. Soon, they realized that they had missed the airfield. They turned around and went back to Ludhiana. All this drama was being picked up by all the sensors I had deployed.

After reaching Ludhiana a second time, the aircraft turned around, followed the canal once again, and approached the airfield from the east. They must have spotted the prominent bend in the canal a bit late. They threw in a left turn to come to the airfield, but they were late and missed the airfield a second time. All this was happening perhaps because they were flying low – and I mean really low.

They continued circumnavigating the airfield. At one stage, they turned quite hard to align themselves with Runway 13. The first aircraft came overhead at about 20 degrees to the runway, and dropped his bombs. He was so low that his bombs did not explode. The L-60 guns opened up, and the L-70s followed. The aircraft remained very low, below the missile cover, and made a getaway.

The second aircraft managed the turn a little better. He was more aligned with the runway, albeit still not quite along it. Just before reaching the circuit zone, he gained a little height to drop his bombs properly. He was successful in his attempt, and his bombs dropped and exploded.

However, he had exposed himself to one of the SA-2 squadrons. Unfortunately for us, the units fumbled a little, and the aircraft exited the kill zone of this unit before the missiles could be launched.

In the getaway, the intruder turned west and tried to dive low. In this manoeuvre, he exposed himself to the kill zone of the other unit for a very brief while. The unit launched a salvo of three missiles. The intruder was diving hard to get close to the ground, but one of the three missiles exploded on proximity warning. The aircraft disappeared from the missile’s radar.

The missile crew was exuberant and wanted to claim a kill. I was unable to accept the claim until the wreckage of the intruder was found and identified.

Thus ended the first skirmish of the war of 1971 for me. Air Force Station Halwara was tested and found alert. It was still few minutes short of midnight between December 3 and 4.

Moments passed. The raid was over. It was time to sound the ‘All Clear’, and get on with the next task. After all, the war had just started a few hours ago and none of us knew how long it would take for us to prevail over the enemy. Of course, there was not an iota of doubt in any one’s mind that we would prevail.

Cleaning up after the bombing

I had to first find out the extent of damage sustained. I knew that two B-57s have off loaded their bombs on us; that would be eight bombs. I knew that I had heard only four explosions. I therefore had to find out not only what damage those four explosions had caused, I also had to find out whether the other four were merely duds or were those delayed explosion stuff waiting to hamper our repair work. I told Gopal to hold the fort, took my Jeep, and drove out on to the runway.

From the BADC dugout, I drove to the centre of the runway. After a few yards, I found the remains of a 500 lb bomb that had broken open. Only a small piece was lying on the runway along with little bits of unexploded charge. The piece seemed to be a part of the middle of the bomb. There was no trace of the tail or the nose section.

I drove towards one end of the runway, zigzagging to throw my headlight beam and see the state of the runway. A couple of hundred metres down, I found a heap of mud on the runway. It was really a huge heap of mud. The source of the mud was not difficult to find. There was a bomb crater just off the shoulder of the runway. The explosion had thrown all that mountain of mud on the concrete. I tried to assess whether any unevenness has been caused to the runway's surface by the blast. I could not really assess the situation as the surface was covered by mud.

Just as I was about to move up, a repair party arrived. It had a bulldozer, and it began its work immediately.

I could see some activity at the end of the runway. When I reached there, I found that there was a bomb crater on the concrete over-run. A repair party had already started its work. It had its full complement of repair machinery such as bulldozers, concrete mixers, road rollers and other such implements.

I met Groupie Gole near the crater. He asked me to inspect the full length of the runway once again.

On my way back I saw a few more pieces of the broken bomb, but a cleaning party was already there looking after the job. About 400 metres beyond the bomb crater on the shoulder of the runway, I found another heap of mud. It was less than the previous instance, but the mud was still substantial. I looked for a crater on the shoulder and found one about 25 metres from the edge of the runway. Further down, there was another instance of mud on the runway and a bomb crater about 30 to 40 metres away from the edge.

So, that explained the four explosions we had heard. The second aircraft had done all this damage. How about the bombs from the first aircraft? I had clearly heard three or four thuds when the first drop took place. Where were his bombs?

I then remembered the broken pieces I had seen on the runway. Well, that piece would account for only one bomb, a dud. I had to account for three others that might be lurking somewhere with delay-fuses! It was clearly something to be concerned about. No other bomb was however found on or near about the runway. I returned to the BADC.

I was confronted by a six-foot something hulk of a DSC (Defence Security Corps troops are used for ground based security of Defence installations) *jawan* at the top of the BADC dugout entrance. He greeted me with a smart salute. I stopped and enquired as to what the matter was. I was told that when he had gone for his routine patrol after the bombs had dropped, he found 'something' lying just off his patrol path. Since it could be something important, he had picked it up, and had brought it here to show it to me.

I was curious. What is it? Where have you placed it? The answer was straightforward. "I have kept it very carefully downstairs next to your chair." I descended the stairs, tailed by this faithful chap. "There it is, sir," he pointed out to the treasure that he had deposited.

How should I express it? I froze? My blood turned to ice? I was dumbfounded? All of the above?

What the guy had brought down to the heart of my BADC was the tail section of a fractured bomb complete, with an unexploded fuse and a few lumps of explosives yet to fall off from the casing! The 'thing' was quite large, and would have easily weighed more than 30 kilos. I certainly would have had difficulty in picking it up.

Very gently, I told my faithful giant that this 'thing' was not suitable for keeping here. It needs to be picked up gently, taken out at least a hundred metres away, and placed on the far side of a large tree there. Care had to be taken while placing it on the ground. It was not to be dropped or rolled, or be allowed to slide along a slope.

He took in all the instructions calmly, picked up the object effortlessly, and walked out. I came out behind him, and watched him disappear behind the tree. "After placing it on the ground, mark it out with stones so that no one stumbles over it by mistake," I shouted after him. Then I came back into the BADC.

My gentle giant reported back to me within minutes. He had placed the object as instructed and had marked it with stones. He was somewhat apologetic; he had no access to any *Choona-Geru* to make the markings prominent. I thanked him profusely and asked him to go back to his post.

I now had to get hold of someone to sandbag the damn object. As I was considering how to get that job done, Bandyopadhyaya came running in. "We need all the manpower available immediately," he panted. "MES's bulldozers are fully occupied in filling the hole on the over run, and in clearing the debris from the runway into the crater on the shoulder. It cannot start on the job of clearing the mud from the runway at the other two spots till this job is done. We cannot wait that long if we want to meet our Time on Targets (TOTs) tomorrow. We shall have to move all that debris manually by hand if necessary." (Note: MES or the Military Engineering Service provides all 'works services' for the Air Force)

I had to act immediately. I asked him to take all the troops and airmen on ground defence duties, and call out a hundred non-technical airmen on rest schedule. "But what will you do about providing these men with brooms and shovels?" I asked him. Bando rushed out, saying that he will manage it somehow.

Someone called out about a track appearing on the screen and I got busy with my routine at the BADC. It was closing on to one o'clock in the morning of 04 Dec 1971. Somewhere, at the back of my mind, there was an element of unease, about some job remaining undone, incomplete, unaccounted for.

The night wore on, amongst hectic activity on the ground. With the runway blocked, I stood the Archers down. Soon the sky filled with planned activity from other stations. The Canberra second round strikes got airborne. Strange 'sparrows' started chirping in the neighbourhood. It was not that we were failing to carry out any task from Halwara. Apart from a pair of MiG21s on ORP (Operational Readiness Platform, where armed air defence aircraft stand and wait for orders to take off within seconds), I had no other allotted task at that time of the night.

However, we had a runway to rehabilitate for use at first light, and we were running against time. If I was a bit restless, perhaps I could be excused.

I went out one more time just after 2.00 am. The work on runway rehabilitation was progressing on schedule. Down the runway, the action of clearing of mud off the concrete was something to watch with wonder and pride. There were over two hundred soldiers and airmen working with their bare hands or with improvised implements like date-palm leaves harvested from the trees across the airfield. Their enthusiasm and dedication was something to watch and wonder at.

Bando was obviously on the ball and progressing well with the task. I felt happy and returned to the BADC.

Fresh explosions

My routine was disturbed with a very loud explosion at 03:36. There was no raid warning, and there was no suspicious air movement anywhere around our airspace. It was therefore not a fresh attack. Clearly, it was one of the so far unaccounted bombs going off. I only hoped that it had not caused any damage.

I rushed out to investigate. From my underground bunker, I had no directional sense of where the noise of the explosion had come. I inquired from three or four Ground Defence posts to triangulate the spot. My estimate pointed to an empty spot, well away from the runway. I made my way to the approximate location. Some others were there ahead of me. Thankfully, it was indeed an empty spot on the airfield. With a silent prayer of thanks, we got back to our jobs. At least one more bomb was still unaccounted for. That element of unease continued in my mind.

It was by now close to 4.00 am. I visited the two strike squadrons on my way to the BADC. The aircrew had started getting in. Strike plans were being revised by pilots who had been allotted with mission numbers. Armourers were arming the aircraft with rockets and guns. There was a general air of purposefulness in both the units.

For the next three hours or so, time passed in a strange mix of a gallop and a crawl. Work on the runway was progressing as fast as could be reasonably expected, but was that pace good enough to meet the deadline at first light? No one seemed to know.

At the BADC, the routine went on. The Canberra fleet was returning after their second raid. Fuel state of one aircraft was causing a little concern, and a diversion was arranged. I felt a little bad that we were not in a position to offer a more active support to the ongoing operations. The air defence environment could only be described as 'normal'.

This normalcy at the BADC was disturbed at first light. First came the information that one more bomb had been discovered amongst the bushes on the airfield. It was lying serenely quite far away from any aircraft movement area. It was discovered because it was close to a bicycle path that airmen used between two areas of technical activity.

Very quickly, the bomb was barricaded with sandbags, and left at that spot without any further action. (It was demolished almost a week after the operations were over). Now at least three of the four bombs from the first aircraft were accounted for. One had exploded late harmlessly, one was found and sandbagged, one was broken and its tail section was found near the BADC. The only uncertainty was whether the fragments of a bomb found on the runway belonged to the bomb whose tail had been found or it was the remains of a fourth bomb.

I did not have an answer to this question. I was also not sure whether I had heard three or four thuds during the first drop. Did the first aircraft have a hang-up? Once again, I did not know.

The second turbulence was in the form of a strafing attack by three Pakistani F104 aircraft on Barnala. We were still non-operational, and could not react to that attack on Barnala from Halwara. However, the AD Arty units at Barnala functioned well, and shot down one of the three aircraft. The raiders were unable to disrupt the operations at Barnala, and the radar continued functioning uninterrupted. ❖

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