

## Non Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) by Mercantile Marine Naval Operations During the 1971 War - Amphibious Operation.

By

Capt Ravindra Hajarnavis

### Background

Most of the Pakistan Navy's combatant vessels were deployed in West Pakistan and only one destroyer, PNS *Sylhet*, was assigned in East Pakistan. During the conflict, East Pakistan's naval ports were left defenceless as the Eastern Command of Pakistan had decided to fight the war without the navy.

Faced with overwhelming opposition, their navy planned to remain in the ports when war broke out. On 4 December 1971, the aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant* was also deployed and its Hawker Sea Hawk attack aircraft contributed to all operations in East Pakistan.

The aircraft successfully attacked many coastal towns in East Pakistan including Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. The sinking of *Ghazi* turned out to be a major blow and setback for Pakistani naval operations in East Pakistan. It diminished the possibility of Pakistan carrying out large-scale naval operations in the Bay of Bengal. It also eliminated the threat posed by the Pakistan Navy to Indian Eastern Naval Command.

### Amphibious Operation

Amphibious warfare is Military operations directed against hostile shores and characterized by attacks launched from the sea by naval and landing forces. It has been conducted since ancient times. The Greeks attacking Troy (1200 BC) had to make a shore landing, as did the Persian invaders of Greece prior to the Battle of Marathon (490 BC). The British-led landings at Gallipoli (1915) were the main amphibious assault in World War I.

Gallipoli was the first major amphibious operation in the modern warfare history. British Empire and French troops landed on the Ottoman held

peninsula in the Dardanelles straits with disastrous consequences for the Allies.

The Allies of World War II found amphibious tactics essential in the famous D-Day of the Normandy campaign, which still ranks as the greatest amphibious assault in history. Amphibious warfare's greatest advantage is its mobility and flexibility; its greatest limitation is that the attacker must start from nothing to build up strength ashore.

Modern amphibious forces attempt to overcome this by fielding larger and more efficient landing vessels and also by using helicopters and short-takeoff and landing airplanes to deploy troops beyond the hostile shore.

The Indo-Pak war of 1971 was a bloodshed event in the annals of Indian history. It was evident that a political solution to the problems of East Pakistan was unlikely and that military confrontation was on the anvil. The political trends at that time acted as a catalyst that led to a high state of preparedness of the Indian Navy and eventually Pakistan's pre-emptive offensive on 03 Dec 71 was a trigger for the Indo-Pak war.

The Indian Navy conducted operations exceedingly well in both Eastern and Western fronts leaving the Pakistan Navy operationally crippled for many years to come.

The amphibious landing operations off Cox's Bazar was planned to cut off the possible escape routes of Pak personnel to Burma. The planning included transporting the troops along with arms, ammunition, stores, etc., to the designated area on board a merchant ship from Calcutta, transfer them to landing ships and crafts of the Indian Navy, and then land them at a suitable site.

For amphibious operation The Shipping Corporation cargo ship m.v. *Vishva Vijay* was deployed, which was waiting to load coal cargo at Kidderpore Docks. One brigade of Indian Army troops, close to 2000, boarded from 5 pm on 09 Dec to 2 am on 10 Dec 1971. During the boarding of Indian Army troops Maj Mastana, of AMC slipped and fell between the ship and the dock and was drowned. Berthing Master and Harbour Master boarded at 1 am to start moving the ship to catch the tide of Hooghly river.

Although m. v. *Vishva Vijay* was under Indian Navy the manoeuvring was still under Ships Captain. Indian Navy officers would convey us rendezvous points and either Captain or Chief Officer on the bridge would manoeuvre the ship accordingly. During this period we got air raid alert 3 or 4 times and submarine alert twice.

Indian Navy ships *Gharial* and *Guldar* were the landing ships while M.V. *Vishva Vijay*, carrying one Army brigade and one company of the Naval Garrison from Calcutta, to be landed at Raju Creek of Cox's Bazar. After many unsuccessful beaching attempts by *Gharial* and *Guldar* due to non-conducive beach conditions, heavy swell, a decision was taken to land troops in boats. Two gangways on either side, port and starboard of the ship and cargonets over the ship's side facilitated transfer of troops to LSTs *Gharial* and *Guldar* as the troops must be transported during dark hours. .

For Gurkhas for the first time in their life landing in the deep sand bar with a heavy 85 lbs weight on their shoulders with combat uniform and heavy boots and walking to the beach was a very risky and dangerous task. Two Gurkhas were drowned and three were rescued. That night operation stopped till rope was passed from sand bar to beach ashore. This operation carried on till 13 Dec night.

By late evening on the same day, the platoons reached Cox's Bazar and observed that *Mukti Bahini* forces had assumed command. Afterwards

landing operation was confined to daylight hours only and at appropriate states of tide. Insufficient data on the landing sites and unexpected sea conditions in the area had rendered landing troops and handling boats extremely difficult and hazardous.

About 1000 to 1200 troops with stores, arms, ammunition and other equipment were landed ashore. As all planning had been done off the map, actual survey of the beach was carried out on arrival.

On 16 Dec Pakistan surrendered. Same evening we were ordered to proceed to Chittagong. Navigation through suspected mine infested approaches to *Karnaphuli* river, to Chittagong port, was a very risky and dangerous operation. With expert mine sweeping naval support we entered safely and the ship was secured alongside the berth. Remaining Army troops disembarked. We were ordered to stay at the berth and wait for POWs to be brought alongside. Almost a week later POWs were brought by Indian Army.

Ship sailed for Calcutta and berthed at King George dock and POWs disembarked from the ship and directly entered into the train which was waiting alongside the docks. POWs were taken directly from docks to Dehradun. We made 3 more trips between Chittagong and Calcutta, every trip carrying around 1500 to 2000 POWs. For the 4th trip we were waiting for 8 to 10 days for Indian Army Special force of commandoes to reach Chittagong port. They were spread all over NE of East Pakistan and adjoining locations. After they arrived ship sailed for Calcutta to disembark them. They were transported to Himachal Pradesh for further engagement. This special force of the Indian Army operates only around the Indo Tibet - China border.

We saw many dead bodies floating in the river passing by our ship. Horrors of war, earlier were read, but in 1971 we actually saw and heard the cry. This was a horrendously tragic, frightening

and depressing part of the 1971 war as witnessed. During this period SCI was facing a tremendous shortage of officers. On *Vishva Vijay* we were only two deck officers Captain and me as Chief Officer. Between the two of us we were doing 4 hrs on 4 hrs off, and carrying out all the duties during the 1971 war, navigation and operational movements as directed by IN.

After the last operation the ship was released by IN back to SCI. A function was held at Calcutta on board the ship attended by Honorable Minister of shipping Mr Raj Bahadur to felicitate all Officers and crew of *Vishva Vijay*. In due course of time, Ministry of Defence, Govt of India, awarded the Captain of the ship Nao Sena Medal and to me as Ch. Off. awarded Mentioned-in-Dispatches.

December 16, 1971 was the day when Pakistan signed the instrument of surrender in Dhaka, following a 13 day India Pakistan War. With the surrender of over 90,000 soldiers, Pakistan Army's capitulation against Indian forces was complete. Following this decisive victory, India announced itself as a major regional force.

No matter how they are measured, the costs of war are enormous. The most tragic and devastating of

the losses caused by the war, was the loss of life. Hundreds of soldiers died in battle and many civilians died by the side effects of the war. The monetary losses associated with the war were equally enormous.

The combatant countries strained their economies during the war and for years thereafter.



*Captain Ravindra Hajarnavis, MID, Master Mariner, B.Sc., M.I.Mar. Teach. Senior Vice President IMF. In 1956 as Naval NCC cadet, sailed on INS Delhi to Madagascar and East Africa. Recipient of Private Pilots Licence (PPL) from Nagpur Flying Club. Avid Golfer at Poona Golf Club and has won many golf tournaments in Western Maharashtra. He and his wife live in Pune. Two sons are investments bankers overseas*

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## Magellan's Discovery of Gateway to Circumnavigating the Globe



*Courtesy : Artist Uffizi*

On 21 Oct 1520, explorer Ferdinand Magellan and three Spanish ships entered the strait later named for him, sailing between the mainland tip of South America and the island of Tierra del Fuego toward the Pacific Ocean.