

**“Sitaron Pe JO Dalte Hain Kamand”**  
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THE YOUNG NAVAL OFFICERS AND THEIR VALIANT CREWS IN EASTPAKISTAN -1971It is always painful to reminiscence or gather thoughts about the incidents in East Pakistan in 1971; however, this is a part of our history and will always remain so. Nations learn from history, sift facts from fictions, draw lessons, value the good therefore should always be correctly recorded for our generations. This write-up, albeit with a lapse of 50 years is to acknowledge and highlight the outstanding Command, Leadership and Professional expertise displayed by the Young Naval Officers (21 to 25 years old) during this crucial period . It was in March 1971, that the affairs of the state in East Pakistan were challenged and a state of anarchy and chaos ensued. The military was called in to enforce the writ of the Government and Navy fully participated in these efforts .At that time, the Naval assets in East Pakistan were 4 Brooke class gunboats manned by experienced commanding officers, officers and crew and one destroyer on periodic visit .The destroyer was tasked for Naval Gun fire support against insurgent held strongholds ashore in Mar/April period. The 4 gunboats were initially deployed around Chittagong to enforce harbor control and port operations. Soon after, these gunboats were dispatched to support Army operations inland (Khulna, Barisal and other important ferry points etc.).These operations continued till June/July 1971, whence a semblance of control over important cities, navigable channels, ports and islands was achieved. This was primarily achieved through these 4 gunboats (the destroyer remained at Chittagong as the upstream channels were too shallow for destroyer operations).This feat of the Gunboat Officers and Crews is remarkable and reflective of their professionalism and untiring efforts to sustain these operations in dire circumstances. The situation towards July 1971 was limping to normalcy but warranted a regular presence and patrolling on all riverine routes, ferry crossings; the Navy did not have adequate assets or personnel to undertake these missions. The Naval planners evolved an excellent plan to convert suitable riverine crafts and LCM by installing 40 mm guns or other such equipment to enable performing the mission .The Naval Planners and Engineers identified and commenced the conversion process. River ferries, Forest dept. boats, IWTA boats and LCMs were requisitioned and converted by equipping them with suitable fire power and portable wireless equipment. These converted crafts were essentially shallow draft floating platforms with basic weapons. Crew comfort, safety or any other factors could not be guaranteed. By August, 18 such platforms were readied; a herculean task gathering a motley of riverine craft with different propulsion, steering and other systems and no guarantees of spares and maintenance support. All this had to be managed to keep these crafts running. Thus, the Navy at this stage had the 4 regular gunboats (these were now commanded by much younger Officers) and the 18 converted gunboats with the following missions to be performed:

- a. Patrolling approaches to main ports of Chittagong and Mongla (Pussur River).
- b. Patrolling main riverine routes to curb insurgent activities (including but not limited to snipers, limpet mine threat etc.) ensuring safe and free riverine traffic.
- c. Escorting logistic and military convoys.
- d. Providing gunfire support to shore based operations.
- e. Through presence enforce and radiate Govt. of Pakistan authority in the areas of responsibility.
- f. Extend support to local population in their daily life matters.

While the converted platforms had been identified and under preparation, the dilemma of sourcing suitable Officers and Crews for them remained. Navy was already facing difficulties in manning its operational Units and making experienced Officers and Crews available for these billets was proving to be a daunting task. It was decided that all Naval Officers who had earned their watchkeeping certificates and had some sea experience will be appointed to billets ashore

and afloat in East Pakistan. Thus, a number of junior lieutenants and sub lieutenants were identified for these assignments. As for shortage on the Crews, in addition to regular CPOs and Sailors, the scheme of "Hostilities Only" was initiated. Under this scheme youngsters from seafaring villages around Keamari were selected for the period of hostilities only. These sailors, though without professional naval training had their "Sea legs" and this enabled them to adapt earliest. These Sailors proved their mettle and within no time stood shoulder to shoulder with the naval sailors. What they lacked in armament handling, they made up with their keenness, zeal and outstanding national spirit. These Sailors need special mention as they were there to serve the nation without any meaningful benefits. They all did the nation proud. The Young naval officers assigned to command and man the converted and regular gunboats had a naval service of 1 to 3 years. They had been trained to perform on naval ships and underwent training for subjects like navigation, gunnery, torpedo warfare and communications. These officers were not trained for riverine operations, where the rivers changed courses daily without any navigational marks or lights at night, no securing facility to shore( these boats , at times were tied to the trees ashore),no regular spares supply, bare essential meals ,limited communication means and no navigational aids .Life onboard was with scant facilities, Rations (monotonous menu) were made available but sleeping, washing one self, washing clothes etc. was almost a luxury. In case of one converted Trawler, the Commanding Officer would bathe on the deck using a bucket of river water. The underlying training for developing the leadership qualities and dealing with difficult situations paid the dividends; all these deficiencies and discrepancies did not dent the spirits of these Young Ones and their crews and they proceeded headlong to fulfill the assigned mission for their beloved country. The situation in East Pakistan, after some stabilization towards august resulted in tasks of riverine convoys escorting, daily patrolling and supporting army operations ashore( as and when the need arose).However, towards October, the insurgents' activities accelerated .These included sniping at patrolling boats, attempts to fix limpet mines, disruption of rations and free movements for the locals. The Naval assets including the converted gunboats pressed on with their mission and in general, no major hindrance was faced. It was in September that a gunboat (Brooke Class) while shifting its operational area had to traverse a narrow waterway reportedly with insurgent activity. The gunboat entered the threatened waters fully prepared. They experienced intermittent sniping and this was responded to by its gunners. One gun, while firing got jammed and there was a brief interlude in the gunboat response. The gunboat was commanded by a Young Lieutenant and his XO was another young Sublieut. The XO went to the gunner to assist in clearing the gun and while they were almost finished clearing the gun, a volley of shots rained from both the banks. The gunner and the CO who were in a lower position were hit in their limbs; the XO who was standing up and looking for the snipers received multiple bullets in his abdomen and started bleeding profusely. The gunboat enhanced its response, quieting the firing from both the banks. The injured crew navigated the gunboat for another one and a half hour reaching Barisal. While, first aid had been administered to the injured, the XO was in a precarious condition. Upon reaching Barisal, he was evacuated to the local hospital under naval protection and was given initial treatment and a helicopter soon arrived to take him to CMH, Dacca. He was subsequently repatriated to Karachi, where he spent time in PNS Shifa undergoing treatment and recovering. He still carries a partial embedded bullet in his abdomen; his Medal of Honour is often revealed when it BEEPS when passing through security gates/metal detectors. The CO was awarded Sitara e Jurrat for his valor in the encounter. The War in East Pakistan started on 22 November 1971, when the Indian aircraft commenced ceaseless attacks on targets in East Pakistan and especially to disrupt the logistical movement. The first naval war casualty took place in the approaches to Pussur River around third week of November. Here, a gunboat commanded by a Sub Lt and a crew of 17 was patrolling approaches to Pussur River to deter insurgent waterborne activity. It was aware of a possible mine threat, but continued the mission. They hit a mine and the boat was blown out of the water. Eleven of the Crews embraced "Shahadat". The

six survivors injured, included the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer (Sub Lt) and 4 CPO, sailors. The injured were moved to Khulna and in no time assigned to duties on other crafts. The CO was assigned to Khulna to support naval efforts and the XO was put in command of a converted gunboat in Narayanganj area. This was the desperation for Officer's and Crew shortage and the spirit of these officers and men to accept challenges and continue their mission. The CO was awarded a Sitara e Jurrat for his valor earlier in April 1971 during army support missions. The XO, too received the SJ award for his heroic discharge of duties in early December on the converted gunboat where he was appointed after this incident. A very important achievement in East Pakistan was laying of a minefield off Chittagong to prevent enemy ships from entering the harbor. Two young lieutenants with 2/3 years' service and around 25 years of age did the impossible. The mines were loaded and laid from a riverine coaster. The fixing of the mine's position was done by an outstanding professional young CO on the accompanying gunboat. These officers had no experience of minelaying or establishing a minefield. Their knowledge was limited to the syllabus material that they had gone through during their training. A minor accident also took place, when one of the mines exploded during this process. This mission was really heroic, where they endangered their lives to ensure that the enemy is denied the port facilities. Their efforts bore fruit. The minefield deterred any enemy port entry. Not only during the period of hostilities but even after 2 years could no enemy ship enter Chittagong. The minefield was subsequently sanitized through minesweeping operations by the Soviet Navy Vessels and their one minesweepers got damaged during these operations. The Young Officer onboard the coaster was awarded the coveted Sitara e Jurrat. The first week of December saw increased Indian Air force activity, as they faced no opposition in the air and from the ground too, it was limited to outdated manual AA guns. This activity would start with the first daylight and continue till sunset. At times, one felt that the Indians were even sending their trainee pilots to freely use the triggers and participate in the "Turkey Shoot". Despite this ominous threat during daylight hours, the Young Commanders and their Valiant crews continued their undaunted mission. Some of these are appended below. A converted gunboat was tasked for mission towards north east of Narayanganj and early morning was subjected to an intense air attack. The gunner on the 40mm AA gun took a direct hit and embraced Shahadat. The Commanding Officer sensing shortage of gun crews took over the .50 Machine Gun. He too was hit and injured. Incessant air strafing resulted in casualties onboard. The boat managed to limp back to Narayanganj. Once alongside, there were no walking persons onboard, they were either dead or stretcher cases. The CO was awarded a Sitara e Jurrat. One of these boats was tasked to lead a convoy of vessels to Chandpur and evacuate the Army troops to Dacca. It was intended to complete the mission during dark hours, but the army troops got delayed. The CO well realizing the dangers, opted to take the risk and moved early morning aiming to be in Narayanganj by 0800. While, few nautical miles short of the Jetty, the convoy was subjected to a brutal air attack and a number of lives were lost. The CO managed to take the boat close to land, so that the casualties could be attended to. The CO (Lieut, 25 years of age) was seriously wounded and his Executive Officer (Sub. Lt, 21 years of age) with a bullet piercing his trachea was initially considered dead, but was evacuated and survived. Both of them earned the coveted recognition for bravery i.e. Sitara e Jurrat. A converted gunboat was tasked to escort a coaster to Chandpur for evacuation of troops and military hardware and while proceeding on its riverine mission was exposed to severe air attack. The Coaster was hit and rendered not under command. The CO recovered the coaster crew (who had jumped overboard) and kept on engaging the Indian aircraft with the sole 20 mm Oerlikon gun and the light machine guns. The CO (earlier survivor of the gunboat lost through mining in third week of November) returned harbor and was awarded Sitara Jurrat. Four of the CPOs, Sailors onboard were also recognized for their outstanding bravery and awarded Tamgha e Jurrat. A converted gunboat was tasked to escort 2 LCMS carrying army troops to reinforce the river crossing at Daudkundi. While, closer to the landing site, the Gunboat and the LCMs came under heavy air

attack and were simultaneously attacked by the insurgents ashore. The Gunboat crew valiantly fought back repulsing the shore attack. The boat however suffered major damage and had to be towed back. The Commanding Officer (Sub. Lt, 22 years of age) was recognized for his performance and awarded Sitara-e-Jurrat. A young Sub.Lt. (22 years old), had arrived in East Pakistan towards mid November 1971 and was assigned to a converted gunboat in Khulna area. It was in first week of December, that the full might of the Indian Air force had been unleashed. This Officer was performing his duties of providing support to the Cargo operations in Mongla port. Daily air attacks were a norm combined with the limpet mine threat and attacks from shore. This brave officer sustained serious injuries in one such attack. It was after a while, that he was removed to a makeshift hospital. He received whatever little medical support that was available but could not survive. He was buried ashore in an "Unmarked Grave". He laid down his life for his country and his family is not even aware as to where he was buried or about his days in the hospital. But, his grit, tenacity and desire to serve the country will always keep him alive and make his family proud. Despite the above setbacks, the available converted gunboats in Narayanganj and the 4 gunboats in Chittagong pressed on with their mission, facing the challenge of unabated air attacks. One gunboat in this area was lost to air attacks and the crew was rescued and appointed to other operational billets. On the fateful day of 16 December, the Officers, CPO's and Sailors at Narayanganj were ordered to leave their crafts and proceed to the Navy HQs in Banani, Gulshan Dacca. This was at a road distance of 27 kilometers and fraught with insurgent activities. No transportation, support, route direction etc. was provided. A very limited number of local road transport was available, and was grossly insufficient to transport the group. The Young Commanders decided that everyone will stay as group and will proceed by walking the route. One of the young lieutenants in the group suffered from kidney ailment and he was advised to use the road transport. He refused to abandon his men and resolved to march along with the others. After a couple of hours, he could not bear to walk and needed water regularly. He was put onto an abandoned cycle rickshaw, which was then pedaled in turn by the group. The group arrived Navy HQ at about 3 in the morning after about 15 hours of walking through dark and unknown insurgent infested streets. The Group's cohesion, mutual support and the leadership of the Commanders ensured safe arrival of all the group members. The ailing lieutenant also was a part of it and he proved his word by "not abandoning his men". Also, on this day, there was chaos in Chittagong and the Young Commanders were desolate over the situation. The Lieutenant in command of the operational gunboat in Chittagong in consultation with others decided to take the risk of running the enemy blockade around the port. A quiet whispering campaign ensued and the gunboat finally left with 47 personnel onboard against a crew strength of 18. Here again the professional acumen of the young lieutenant who had earlier provided his navigational skills for minelaying came to the fore. He successfully navigated the gunboat through the enemy controlled waters towards the Burmese coast and finally to Penang in Malaysia. The gunboat and the crew were then transported to Pakistan. This gunboat has remained in Navy service upon return. This daring act of the Young Commanders resulted not only in saving a national asset but also very valuable trained manpower which became available to the Navy. The Commanding Officer was awarded Sitara-e-Jurrat for his outstanding performance. Of the 19 Sitara-e-Jurrat gallantry awards in the East Pakistan theatre in 1971, 11 were awarded to the Young Commanders (ages 19 to 25 years) and this alone is reflective of their outstanding command and leadership quality. This is not to say, that the others were any less. Each Officer, CPO and Sailor performed equally well and contributed to the war efforts despite all the limitations, paucity of material, weaponry and all other amenities of daily life. The above heroic deeds of the Young naval officers and their valiant crews speaks volumes of their devotion, valor, vigour and the excellent training they had received which enable them to face and deal with the most unexpected environments of fighting the insurgency, undertaking riverine operations in uncharted waters, fighting the enemy and their aircraft with obsolete and hardly operational guns and weapons. They still achieved their

mission. All support missions were carried out till the end (despite enemy air activity). No enemy surface unit entered any East Pakistani port up to December 1971 and the port of Chittagong remained inaccessible due to the brilliantly laid minefield for over a year. Highest standards of leadership and morale were displayed. Throughout the period from August to December 1971, no case of ill-discipline or insubordination took place. No request for repatriation on compassionate grounds was made by any personnel. Despite breakdown of mail and communication with the families, poor living conditions and other limitations, each person performed with dedication and displayed the qualities that makes a nation proud. The personnel came from all parts of Pakistan (west) and lived together like a family, caring for each other and of course their unflinching faith in their Young Commanders, who did not let them or the nation down. These were the Young Commanders and their Crews aiming for the STARS. I have had the privilege of serving in East Pakistan. I participated in these operations and am witness to the heroic deeds of my colleagues and their crews. I was there from September 1970 to February 1971 on a destroyer. During this period, I participated in the 1970 Cyclone support missions and the elections in December 1970. Then, I was on a destroyer in Chittagong from May to August 1971. In August, I was appointed to a converted gunboat at the age of 22 years and one year sea service. I had a crew of 12 outstanding, dedicated and professional CPO and Sailors, who never once questioned the command decisions and were most obedient and performing in very adverse conditions. I feel privileged to have led them, learnt from them and performed for our Navy and the Country. LONG LIVE PAKISTAN.