

## Last Flight from East Pakistan

*Columnist Brig (Retd) SHER KHAN discusses the amazing escape of the complete Army Aviation Detachment personnel from East Pakistan in December 1971.*

On December 16, 1971, at 1:05 p.m., an Allouette III helicopter of the Pakistan Army took off from near Dacca airport, and flew past the airfield where preparations were afoot at the VIP helipad at the foot of the ATC tower for receiving General Aurora, commander of the Indian forces that had attacked East Pakistan earlier in the month. Flying at deck level, the helicopter, piloted by Major Mohammad Zareef Bangash, headed southward towards the Burmese city of Akyab at the northern tip of that country. Also on board were Major Tauhid ul Haq, another Allouette pilot, Major Ijaz Minhas, an aviation engineer, and a PAF squadron leader; in the rear seat were ten jerry cans of spare jet fuel for refueling en route, since this type of helicopter did not have the endurance to reach its destination on the fuel in its tanks. After about four and a half hours of flying, skimming the Bay of Bengal and the terrain to avoid detection by Indian naval forces which had a very strong presence in the Bay of Bengal, and an additional hour or so spent in refueling in the Arakan jungles south of Chittagong, the helicopter set down safely at Akyab towards dusk. That same fateful day in the history of Pakistan, and an inglorious day in the history of the Pakistan Armed Forces, in the words of Lt General Kamal Matiuddin in his book on the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, 'Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, H.J, S.J, MC, Mention in Despatches, signed the instrument of surrender at 4:31 p.m. on 16 December, 1971 and handed over the control of Pakistan's eastern province to its bitterest enemy.'

Recently I got Zareef, now a retired colonel, to talk about his memorable flight of nearly three decades ago. It is an interesting tale, worth sharing with the readers; it may also help shed some light on some of the controversies that have arisen in the wake of the publication of parts of the Hamood Ur Rehman Commission Report, and hopefully will not open up new ones. Here is the gist of an hour-long chat:

'In the early part of April 1971, soon after the 'military crackdown' of 25 March 1971, I was ordered to proceed to Karachi for duty in East Pakistan with the Aviation Logistic Flight attached to Eastern Command. There were three other fixed wing pilots with me. At Karachi airport, we boarded a PIA Boeing 707 from the Hajj Terminal along with a company or so strength of Khyber Rifles, whose men were carrying their arms and ammunition with them. Soon after we were airborne, the pilot called me to the cockpit, and enquired what we had loaded on to the airplane, saying that he had just managed to barely lift the aircraft off the end of the runway because it was much too heavy, and advising us to be a little more careful about weight in the future. Anyhow we had an uneventful flight till Colombo (direct flights over India to Dacca having been banned in the wake of the engineered Ganga hijacking incident), when the pilot called me into the cockpit again. This time, he reported that two Indian fighters were tailing him. He, therefore, climbed higher and gave more throttle to gain speed, and lost the fighters, but flying up the eastern coast of India, he was again similarly harassed by Indian aircraft a number of times. Anyhow, we landed at Dacca quite safely, and took up our duties.

'Since there were no Army airplanes in East Pakistan, we were converted onto Cessna of the flying club, and Beavers of the Plant Protection Department. We would then be tasked to fly all kinds of missions, such as command and liaison, observation, reconnaissance, etc., apart from conducting the occasional artillery shoots from the air onto Indian concentrations close to the border. One of the most memorable ones was an artillery shoot in the Feni area, with Major General Qazi, if I recall correctly, the 33 Division commander himself sitting in the

aircraft, along with one of his artillery unit commanders. There was a Plant Protection pilot at the controls of the Beaver, I was his co-pilot and observer, and we flew for over five hours that day, shooting at and registering targets across the border. For better observation, we were flying at around five thousand feet above the ground. During the flight, at times we would get the feeling as if the aircraft had been hit by ground fire, but there seemed to be no physical evidence of it. Later on, we learnt that we were being fired upon by Indian air defense artillery guns, but since the fuses on the ammunition were designed to detonate at around four and a half thousand feet, they were bursting below us. Mercifully, the Indians did not call up any fighters to engage us.

'Around the first week of May, I reported back to Dhamial Camp near Rawalpindi for conversion on Alouette III helicopters, and in October I, was sent back to East Pakistan. By that time, the Army Aviation Squadron had arrived there in full strength, so as such there were six Mi 8 and six Alouette III helicopters operating under Eastern Command. In the months leading up to the break out of open hostilities by the Indian Army crossing the international borders, the squadron was kept busy flying a host of varied missions, including resupply of arms and ammunition, taking General Niazi and his staff to various formations and headquarters, besides carrying regular troops and commandos to regain positions taken by the Mukti Bahini, etc. One of the frequent missions was to take around international observers and media teams to various points and areas where the Mukti Bahini and Indian agents had engaged in hostilities or had perpetrated atrocities, etc.

Apart from Alouette flying with senior captains like the late Nauman Mahmood, Saghir, etc, I would occasionally sit in the copilot's seat of the Mi 8s also when there was a shortage of crew. On Eid day in November, General Niazi went around the various headquarters by helicopter to meet and greet the troops. That day, we learnt that one of our PAF aircraft which had intruded into India had been shot down and the pilot bailed out, while the other damaged aircraft, flown if I recall correctly by PQ Mehdi, the recently retired Air Chief, managed to make it back to Dacca. By then there were a lot of hostilities taking place, the Muktis were getting very active, and all of our troops deployed in various sectors were bracing for the impending Indian invasion, which seemed imminent. Because of the Mukti factor, communications by land and riverine craft had become very hazardous and in some instances impossible, so the helicopters and their crew were constantly pressed into service. One of our main missions was to evacuate casualties, and sometimes taking artillery shoots against troop concentrations across the border. One of my most painful missions was to conduct a shoot onto my own battalion, into which I had been commissioned and spent the first four years of my service with, i.e. 4 Bengal Regiment, at Barab Bazar, when Pakistani forces were trying to retake the place. I must say that the EME maintenance crew did a remarkable job keeping the helicopters serviceable despite their non-stop commitment, when removed from their main logistical and maintenance base in West Pakistan. On a lighter note, one of our missions was to resupply the government treasuries in different towns which had been looted. For some one earning a few hundred rupees a month, it was a mouth-watering experience to transport crores of rupees by helicopter.

'As soon as the war broke out in December, the helicopters were dispersed all over the Dacca cantonment. The Indians bombarded the Dacca airfield and disabled it at the outset, and the PAF aircraft could not take off. Thereafter, the Indians dominated the skies completely, so that most of our flying became restricted to the night time. The squadron flew extensively throughout this period, mostly at night, flying blindly since even putting on the landing lights drew intense ground fire. Luckily, my four years of early service in East Pakistan was a great help since I knew the terrain very well. A couple of days before the surrender took place; I was detailed to fly a staff officer from Eastern Command to some of the subordinate headquarters whose communications had been cut off.

Wherever we landed he handed out an envelope to the local commander, which drew reactions from resigned acceptance to fury: the envelopes contained news of the impending surrender. I remember that the most furious reaction was that of the officer commanding the Chittagong garrison, which had been cut off from the rest of the country early in the conflict, and had been blockaded by the Indian Navy. He flung the orders in our face, saying that he would not accept an abject surrender when his troops had not even been bloodied! Anyhow, he allowed the Commissioner and DIG Police, both West Pakistanis, to be evacuated to Dacca in my helicopter.

'On 15 December, the Squadron Commander, Lt Col Liaqat Asrar Bukhari held a conference, and told the officers that he had been permitted/ordered by Eastern Command to evacuate all the serviceable aircraft that night to Akyab in Burma, along with the maximum number of women and children. However, one Allouette and its crew were to stay back at the disposal of General Niazi should he need it for any reason. Tauhid ul Haq and I, both of us bachelors, had been selected. (In the words of Gen Matinuddin, 'On 15 December Niazi sent a signal to Manekshaw accepting a conditional ceasefire in East Pakistan. Major Liaqat Asrar Bukhari, commanding 4 Army Aviation Squadron in East Pakistan to the General on that day that he was prepared to fly his team out in the hours of darkness to Burma if permitted to do so. Air Commodore Inamul Haq felt that on view of total air superiority enjoyed by the IAF that it would not be possible. Rear Admiral Sharif opined that Liaqat should be allowed to give it a try, as several helicopters would be prevented from falling into enemy hands.

General Niazi agreed and ordered Liaqat to take Major General Rahim with him as he was wounded and that he had to send some important documents through him to Islamabad. He also informed Liaqat that some nurses would also be sent with him.'). That night there was complete chaos and confusion as everyone tried to get their families onto the departing helicopters. The situation got out of control of the pilots, and there was much shoving and pushing, as many more than the authorized loads tried to cram into the helicopters. (General Matin says that 139 women and children were evacuated that night, nearly double the number normally permissible). There was no sign of any nurses at the takeoff points, and there was no time to be wasted by delaying the departure so as to exit East Pakistani air space before dawn, so at about 3 a.m. on 16 December four Mi 8s and two Alouettes got airborne and were on their way south, of which I was informed by the 'Killer' radar still operating at Dacca. The PAF personnel manning the radar then destroyed it, and the F-86 jets at the airfield to avoid their falling into enemy hands. Next morning, to my surprise Major Saghir and Masood Anwar, who were supposed to have escaped with the other aircraft, came to the squadron command post, which I had been manning, and said that they had been unable to go because their Allouette would not start. After much persuasion and cajoling they convinced me that we should seek permission from the Eastern Command to fly out in daylight. The scene at the Headquarters was chaotic, since the hour of the surrender was drawing near. I think it was Air Commodore Inam who gave us a hell of a rocket for still being around, and told us to take the helicopters and make a dash for it. He also asked by me to take a PAF officer with him since he was no longer needed.

'We drove back to where our helicopters were parked; Major Saghir's was at some distance from mine and I lost contact with him till we met in Akyab later that day. We loaded up independently, with spare fuel since the endurance of the Alouettes was much less than the flying time to Akyab (the Mi-8s were equipped with long distance ferry tanks), started up and took off, passing over the reception party lining up to receive General Aurora at the airport. Skimming the trees, we headed south. Some distance from Chittagong, the fuel filter warning light came up, indicating that it was clogged, and an emergency landing

must be made to clean or replace it, otherwise the engine would be starved of fuel in a few minutes. Being hostile territory, we flew on regardless for quite some time, till we reached the Arakan forests, where we found a small patch of clearing to land in. Major Ijaz Minhas set about changing the fuel filter, while we poured unfiltered fuel straight from the jerry cans into the fuel tanks without any filtration, something which is never normally done. In this process some primitive tribesmen wandered over to our position, and had to be kept at bay by one of pointing a sub-machine gun at them. Then, when we were ready to go, the engine would not light up when cranked. A second and a third attempt yielded the same results: the fuel was just not getting to the engine. By now the battery had been almost drained. It was a devastating feeling, after having escaped from Dacca, to be stranded in a jungle hundreds of miles from nowhere. After giving the battery some time to recoup, with prayers on our lips and our hearts in our mouths, I cranked the engine for one last try. Slowly and sluggishly, after what seemed an eternity, the engine finally lit up and picked up speed. We lifted off, and made it into Akyab as dusk was beginning to fall.

The Burmese authorities confined us, and the crew and passengers who had arrived earlier in the day, wanting us to know who we were and why we had entered Burmese airspace without permission. They would not buy the story that all the crew and aircraft were civilians, and soon established our true identities, despite our civilian clothes and the obliterated military markings on the aircraft. Within a few days, all of us, including those who had arrived earlier by Mi 8, were sent to Rangoon, some by air, and others by road, and handed over to the Pakistan Embassy for repatriation. A few weeks later, we all flew back via Colombo and thence to Karachi, where we were welcomed back by Brigadier G. Jabbar, Base Commander of Army Aviation Base, Dhamial (later Qasim Base). A few weeks later, Pakistani crew were allowed back into Burma to ferry the helicopters to Bangkok, from where they were shipped out to Karachi.

#### *End Notes*

- 1. Air Commodore (later Air Marshal) Inam ul Haq, the senior PAF officer in East Pakistan, was instrumental in getting all the PAF pilots out of Dacca soon after the airfield at Dacca became permanently non-operational in PIA and Plant Protection Department aircraft, which all flew out to Burma. He himself, however, stuck to his post and then was taken as POW.*
- 2. It is not known whether Pakistan ever acknowledged its debt to Burma for not handing over the crew, passengers and the aircraft that sought refuge on its shores despite demands to that effect from Bangladesh and India for their return.*
- 3. Zareef has had more than his share of luck in his long aviation career, beginning with a tail rotor control failure as a student pilot when learning to fly an OH-13S helicopter in 1969. He executed a safe landing. The cause of the control failure was a mechanic using a used cotter pin instead of a new one to secure the retaining nut after he had worked on the tail rotor (I was then in charge of OH-13S maintenance!) He now flies for Askari Aviation. May his luck never run out.*