

A Village Ablaze, a Blown Bridge; Enraptured Jessore Greet Troops

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CALCUTTA, India, Dec. 20—Jottings from the notebook of one correspondent who covered the Indian Army in the 15 days of the war with Pakistan:

Dec. 5

The army public relations office arranges a trip in East Pakistan for some newsmen. It takes five hours to drive to the war over bad roads. We arrive in Uthali, a small, dusty village about three miles inside, which was taken by the army on the first night of the war.

Nothing to see except empty Pakistani bunkers and discarded ammunition boxes until an Indian soldier standing about a hundred yards away starts yelling "Hands up!" at us.

We think he's joking but put our hands up anyway. He keeps yelling and walking forward and pointing his Sten gun at us. I grow uneasy. He looks drunk. Some photographers start taking pictures of him and this enrages him. He walks faster toward us, gets within 25 yards and cocks the Sten gun. Our escort officer, a major, yells "Stop, stop!"

The soldier drops to one knee and aims the gun at us. We scatter and hit the dirt. The major, screaming at the soldier, rushes forward and pulls the barrel down. The crisis is over and the soldier is led away. This is not the action we came for.

We go to another liberated town nearby, Darsana. Lieut. Col. Bhupal Singh tells us about the battle there and shows us his battle scar—a graze at the base of his spine. As the television cameras grind, he turns his back, bends over and pulls up his shirt to show a small plaster. He stays in that position until the television people tell him they've got enough film of his back.

At the deserted railway depot the last entry in the stationmaster's book is for the morning of March 26—the morning after the Pakistani reign of terror began.

A crippled old man, Mazzam Hussein Mia, hobbles onto the station platform. He says he has been in hiding for nine months near the town because, unlike the other residents, he could not flee fast enough to get to India when the Pakistani soldiers came.

We return to Colonel Singh's headquarters for further briefing. He gets fed up with newsmen asking questions and wandering around on their own, so he orders the troops in some nearby emplacements to fire a few rounds to scare us and make us leave. They start firing. The television crews swarm to the emplacements to take pictures of the firing.

"Please control these fellows!" the colonel yells at our escort officer. The officer is equally exasperated. "I told you not to let them go there," he replied. "You let them go and now you tell me to control them."

As we leave the escort officer is mumbling to himself: "Fighting the press is worse than fighting the war."

We head for a village about 15 miles away, Suadih, where a battle has just ended. It is still burning when we get there, the mud huts knocked down and the thatch roofs set ablaze when Indian artillery tried to flush out the Pakistanis who had retreated there. Grimly silent villagers carry water from the village pond and pour it on the flames. An old man weeps uncontrollably.

In a field a few hundred yards away, 22 Pakistani soldiers lie dead in their bunkers—some in positions of repose, others broken and twisted grotesquely by the artillery bursts. One bunker is caved in—a burial mound with two booted feet protruding.

In Calcutta, when we get back that night, Firpo's Restaurant is holding "An Evening With Miss Calcutta 1971"; she was chosen in a contest the night before.

Calcutta is disturbed only superficially by the war. The blackout annoys some people and buses bear placards with slogans such as: "Don't Panic or Listen to Rumors" and "Be United Against the Enemy." But the crowds of Sunday strollers are of normal size as are the armies of beggars.

Dec. 8

A trip to Jessore, whose people are celebrating their first full day of liberation. On the 80-mile jeep drive from Calcutta, village crowds come out to cheer us and touch our hands.

Almost no young women can be seen, for they have been the objects of Pakistani sexual brutality and will be the last to return from their hiding place and refugee camps in India.

Some fields are unsown others overgrown with uncut sugar at Jhikargacha, over the Kabathaki River, is blown up—the Pakistanis' last act before retreating to Jessore.

We cross the river on small boats as the army goes about the help of hundreds of vi-

lagers eager to help. On the other side small, newly made Bangladesh flags are selling for 75 paise in Indian money, or about 10 cents. On our arrival the price goes up to a rupee, or about 13 cents.

The countryside is not badly scarred by the war, except where set battles took place, and even there the debris does not remain for long. Villagers strip the Pakistani bunkers for building materials—wooden beams and corrugated metal sheets. They also strip the occasional burned-out Pakistani vehicles. The next rains will blur any remaining scars.

Squads of guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini march or bicycle down the road, their faces serious. They are not being used much in the front lines, but it was they who harassed and demoralized the Pakistani troops, and they are determined not to let their dignity or morale slip.

We enter Jessore and drive to the military cantonment. No sign of fighting here. The big battle was fought north of the city. Maj. Gen. Dalbir Singh, commander of the Ninth Division and a very round and hefty man, gives a briefing at which he says the Jessore troops are retreating down the road to Khulna, "They'll surrender or otherwise we'll destroy them. I'm endowed with a gentle nature."

Asked to reconcile his capture of Jessore with the statements made by officials in New Delhi that the plan was to bypass it, he replied: "Some are destined to die for their country and some are destined to lie for their country."

With the general's permission, we go down the road toward where Indian forces are attacking the retreating Pakistanis. Pakistani bedding and belongings are scattered at the roadside, left behind in the pell-mell retreat. A letter from a boy in West Pakistan to his soldier-father tells him to "crush India."

The bodies of two Bengali civilians are in a field nearby—being gnawed on by dogs. Villagers say the retreating Pakistanis killed them. Another Bengali lies not far away, his left arm cut off and the flesh of his chest torn away.

We start back. Driving through Jessore again, we see enraptured crowds of Bengalis hail an incoming column of Indian troops. The Bengalis cheer and embrace and kiss their liberators. A bus drives by, full of jubilant Mukti Bahini, some of them dancing on the roof. Their guns poke out of every window, so the bus looks like a rolling pincushion.

Dec. 9

The evidence is growing that the Pakistanis are slaughtering Bengalis as they retreat and that the Mukti Bahini and other Bengalis are, in turn, taking vengeance on the Pakistanis and their civilian collaborators. The Indian Army issues strict orders against reprisal executions by the Bengalis in the hope of avoiding massacres.

An army captain says he has seen several mutilated bodies of Pakistani soldiers along the route, their fingers and nipples chopped off and their throats slit.

Dec. 13

I take a drive with another reporter toward Khulna to see how that battle is going. My driver, Mr. Singh, gets nervous as we approach the booming artillery guns. We are still a few miles away, but his speed drops to almost zero. "If you don't want to drive, Mr. Singh," I tell him, "I'll drive." "You drive, Sahib," he says as he gets out, smiling and relieved.

"Welcome to Khulna," says the road sign. Long columns of infantry carrying everything from cooking pots to bazookas are walking down the road.

We walk too. My colleague inquires about the possibility of mines. "No bloody mines, sir," says a soldier in a foxhole, laughing.

A medium tank rolls by toward the front; the commander waves. It's a friendly war. The Indians, at least, are happy and friendly and brimming with confidence.

A jeep carrying Indian wounded comes back from the fighting. In the back a man's legs are sticking up in the air, as though he'd been tossed in head first.

It's tough slogging for the Indians. The Pakistanis are dug in well and fighting bitterly. As the brigade commander, Sandhu Singh, spoke, a couple of incoming artillery shells exploded about 200 yards away. Heavy Pakistani machine-gun fire offers a pizzicato in the background.

On the way back people who fled the shooting are returning to their homes. The Bengalis are never more than a mile or two behind, filling the vacuum the army leaves in its wake. Some of the returnees are from the refugee camps in India, carrying their pathetic sacks of belongings. They look uncertain, nervous.

Dec. 14

The Indian Army has picked 11 newsmen, including me, to accompany the troops on their final push into Dacca.

We leave Calcutta for Agar-

tala, an Indian border city on the eastern side of East Pakistan, in an Indian Air Force DC-3 with no door.

We are flying across the breadth of East Pakistan, the first Indian military plane to do it since 1947, when India and Pakistan were born in mutual hatred. There seems no danger, for Pakistani's entire air force in the East has been shot down and the only anti-aircraft guns left are in Dacca, and we are flying north of the capital.

As we land a work crew is repairing runway damage inflicted by the Pakistanis at the start of the war.

We leave immediately in three jeeps and a truck, crossing into East Pakistan at Kasba, where buildings with gaping holes bear witness to a fierce battle.

One jeep sputters to a stop. Another has a flat tire. We double up and push on, reaching 57th Division headquarters at Brahmanbaria after dark and missing by half an hour the river steamer that was to take us down the Meghna River to Narsingdi.

Dec. 15

Our riverboat leaves Brahmanbaria, pushing a pontoon raft carrying two 5.5-inch artillery pieces. The Indian troops on the riverbank clown and pose for pictures.

After a long-delayed trip by road to brigade headquarters at Bhulta, about nine miles from Dacca, we spend the night in a prosperous farming village of 300 called Bhaila. The mosquitoes are large.

Dec. 16

The artillery fire grows heavy at 5:15 A.M. With the guns as a leitmotif, the villagers serve us—on china and glassware that must have been dug out of someone's trunk—a superior breakfast of flat wheat bread, beef and chicken curry, hard-boiled eggs and tea. The village gathers to watch us eat.

We are greeted at the headquarters of the Fourth Battalion, Brigade of Guards, by the commander, Lieut. Col. Himmeth Singh. Sitting in a haystack, a map on his lap, he orders tea for us and then lays out the battle plan. He hasn't shaved since the war began and says that, as a lucky charm, he won't until it's over.

At 9:12 A.M. the colonel's 75-mm. mountain guns began banging away at Pakistani positions across the Lakhya River. We walk down to watch. Villagers have gathered to watch too.

The battery of six guns fires for about an hour, to the applause of the villagers. We retire to the shade of tea and hard-boiled eggs. For us this has been a war with a lot of time out for refreshments.

The Pakistanis finally heed the surrender and the brigade is pulling up and moving toward Dacca in an exhilarating march of triumph. Scores of jubilant Bengalis march along with their heroes. I hitch a ride part way on a tank.

After the chaotic surrender ceremony in Dacca small-arms fire punctuates the night. People are taking revenge on the collaborators and some of the collaborators are firing back.

We hitch our final rides—first on a helicopter to Agartala and from there on a plane. The helicopters whirring behind us in the night look like giant fireflies.

In Calcutta, on our return, Indian Bengalis are celebrating the birth of Bangladesh with fireworks and brass bands. The blackout has been lifted. Mr. Singh can drive again without squinting.