

INS Valsura in the 1965 War



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B C Chatterjee was born in 1920, joined the Indian Navy, received the Ati Vishist Seva Medal, and retired from the Navy in 1972. After this, he joined M/s Standard Batteries Ltd., where he was responsible for the first indigenous production of Submarine Batteries in collaboration with a Swedish firm. He retired from Standard Batteries in 1995.

Editor's note: This is an excerpt from a larger autobiography under preparation. The preparation of this article has been greatly facilitated by a person close to the author.

Over 1962-1965, I was the Commanding Officer, INS Valsura, Jamnagar. (*Editor's note: INS means Indian Naval Ship. INS Valsura is a shore based training establishment of the Indian navy for electrical engineering.*) This job is akin to that of a Dean/ Principal of a large technical institution. A large number of naval technical and non-technical personnel as well as civilians are part of this establishment. The courses conducted here vary from simple technical training to advanced Post Graduate technical training for Officers and Sailors of the Indian Navy as well as foreign navies.

One of the most memorable events during my tenure was the establishment's involvement in the 1965 War between Indian and Pakistan. The role played by Valsura to deal with this historic event does not seem to be widely known. No other Indian naval training establishment has ever been so actively involved in any war operations.

On 06 September 1965, an intelligence message was received from the local Air Training Wing (ATW) of the Air Force of a likely air attack on Jamnagar that evening. Valsura was immediately put on alert and all field games were cancelled. All personnel were instructed to remain indoors or near covered shelters. Black-out to the maximum possible extent was also enforced.

True to the intelligence prediction, two Pakistani B57 bombers, with no markings, flew low over Valsura and carried out a number of sorties over ATW, dropping bombs. In those days, ATW had neither any night-fighters nor any anti-aircraft defence, and looked completely helpless. Even for extinguishing fires, INS Valsura responded to their request for help with fire-fighting parties.

On the following days, we got ourselves better organized to meet the exigencies. Trenches were dug with the help of our sailors and stringent black-out measures were introduced. PO (*Editor's note: PO means Petty Officer, a Sailor's rank in the Indian Navy*) and Ldg (*Editor's note: Ldg means Leading Seaman, a Sailor's rank in the Indian Navy*) Qualifying courses were temporarily discontinued, and regular rifle training introduced in lieu. When they were fully trained to handle the rifles, these sailors were employed for perimeter sentry duties along with DSC (*Editor's note: DSC means Defence Security Corps, a cadre in the Ministry of Defence entrusted with security of shore based establishments*) personnel.

The Pakistani air raids were repeated during dark hours on 12 and 18 September 1965. By then, we had blackened a long stretch of the shining china-mosaic roof of our technical block, and posted look-outs at the two extreme ends of the roof-top, complete with binoculars attached to direction finders.

These look-out posts proved to be most useful. During each Pakistani air raid, it was observed that light flashes were being used by pro-Pakistani elements in the town to guide the aircraft to the blacked-out city. By using the direction-finding equipment from the two observation posts, the approximate locations of

such flashlights were plotted on the Jamnagar map, and immediately communicated to Jamnagar, DSP (*Editor's note: DSP means Deputy Superintendent of Police*). The DSP promptly sent out his scouts to apprehend the culprits. A large number of them were thus rounded up and found to be in possession of extra-large size torches, powerful enough to guide the bombers.

Arming the inexperienced sailors for perimeter sentry duties had, of course, the inherent risk of accidental shooting of innocent people. But fortunately, this did not happen. The only mishap was the shooting of a stray donkey on a moonlit night. This unfortunate donkey could not satisfactorily respond to the sentry's challenge. Next morning, I had to face representation from a large retinue of *dhobis* (washermen), who had to be adequately compensated for their loss.

To stem the continued Pakistani air attack, I persuaded the Group Captain in charge of ATW to fly their day-fighters at night, with runway lights temporarily switched on, under the cover of Valsura's Long-range Air Warning Radar set. This makeshift arrangement of IAF day-fighters assuming the role of night-fighters worked wonderfully well. Every time the enemy aircraft was picked up on our Radar Screen at about 100 miles, our fighters immediately took off and closed in on them. Soon thereafter, the Radar Screen clearly showed the enemy aircraft turning back. The enemy bombers did not venture to risk themselves after spotting out fighters. Our W/T (*Editor's note: W/T means Wireless Telegraphy*) Communication network functioned very satisfactorily during these operations for maintaining effective communications with ATW and the airborne fighters.

During this period, there was also a threat of Pakistani naval attacks and landings on the Gujarat coast. A Maritime Operations Room (MOR) was therefore set up in a selected classroom in Valsura, most effectively manned by Instructors Branch Officers. For feeding reliable data, young Officers from Valsura were deployed in various ports by previous arrangement with the Port Officers, viz., Sikka, Salaya, Dwarka, Porbandar, and Mangrol on the Gujarat coast, and Mandvi located across the Gulf of Kutch. Information regarding movement of ships and aircraft as well as any abnormal incidents was fed to the MOR through respective Port Officers. To maintain secrecy, a code was drawn up locally, and coded messages were used in telephone communications between the reporting centres and MOR.

The enthusiasm displayed by these outstation and MOR personnel was extraordinary. Various measures undertaken by Valsura to face the wartime situation worked smoothly, partly on account of excellent cooperation received from civil authorities in Jamnagar and Gujarat Port authorities. The Telephone Department also worked most efficiently, and communication between Valsura, local civil authorities, Western Naval Command and Naval Headquarters was never disrupted during the entire period.

Unfortunately, information provided by the civil authorities was not always correct. The most unforgettable event was on 15 September 1965, when the DM (*Editor's note: DM means District Magistrate*) reported the landing of a large contingent of Pakistani commandoes near Sikka, and advancing towards ATW. Lower decks were cleared, and in addition to DSC personnel, all sailors of PO and Ldg Qualifying courses were issued with rifles and deployed along Valsura's perimeter. Junior sailors were positioned at various observation posts. Officers and senior sailors were issued with arms and allocated key stations to guard. Ladies and children were brought together in selected buildings, which were guarded by Officers and Senior sailors. Suddenly, for the first time "Action Stations" existed at Valsura, but morale was high and every Officer and Sailor was determined to do his duty.

Apart from contacting the Jamnagar civil authorities again, the Port Officer at Sikka and the manager of the cement factory at Sikka were also contacted. Both confirmed reports of the Pakistani landing. However, to remove all doubts, I sent Lt Cdr Rawat (*Editor's note: Lt Cdr means Lieutenant Commander, an Officer's rank in the Indian Navy*), the First Lt. (*Editor's note: First Lt means First Lieutenant, a designation for specific duties of an Officer in a Naval establishment*), along with three selected sailors, to Sikka in a jeep to carry out a recce, with instructions to use the utmost restraint and to send a sitrep (*Editor's note: Sitrep is an acronym used in military parlance for Situation Report, which is relayed by a scout team back to the base camp*) as soon as possible.

When no message was received for some time, I called up the cement factory to find out the latest. The manager proudly informed me that the local police and home guards had intercepted four armed Pakistani infiltrators with fake Naval Identity cards, which had been confiscated and the “infiltrators” detained in the lockup. I had to explain to them that they were indeed my boys, and when Lt Cdr Rawat was brought in to talk to me, he explained the whole incident. Of course, they were released at once and returned early next morning without any evidence of the Pakistanis.

In addition, this information on infiltration had also been communicated to Rear Admiral David, Flag Officer, Bombay, who in turn informed Vice Admiral Soman, the Chief of Naval Staff. There was similar action from the Air Force Station as well. The response of Delhi was instantaneous. Before break of dawn, a Liberator bomber, full of Army Commandoes, armed with the latest weapons, landed in ATW, who for the first time did not feel themselves as defenceless as before.

The report of the Pakistani landing eventually turned out to be false. It seemed that a large number of men were trekking in darkness along the railway line from Sikka towards Jamnagar due to disruption of train services, and had been mistaken to be Pakistani infiltrators. This gross error by civil authorities was no doubt influenced by the prevailing threat of Pakistani landing at any time.

In any case, the 1965 Indo-Pak war gave the personnel of Valsura an opportunity to organize themselves, with limited resources of a training establishment, to face a wartime situation effectively. It will be borne out by all personnel stationed at Valsura at that time how boldly they had faced the task and how efficiently they had maintained all Radar and W/T equipment in optimum operational readiness. In spite of grave danger, the families had refused to leave Jamnagar and go to safer places. Valsura was a very large happy family to them and they would not part from it voluntarily. ❖

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