OPERATION CACTUS

ANATOMY OF ONE OF INDIA'S MOST DARING MILITARY OPERATIONS

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Group Captain Ashok K Chordia (Retd)

Introduction by

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Cover design shows a note written by Brig FFC Bulsara before the Indian Task Force landed at Hulule and souvenirs presented by Maj Mohammed Zahir to the author (+91-9810608239 akchordia@gmail.com)

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To my beloved parents…

Contents

Acknowledgements

A desire to write about Operation Cactus had been brewing in my mind for a long time. But every time there was an urge to put pen to paper, I found one reason or the other to shelve the idea. Acquaintance with two people tipped the status quo and nudged me out of my self-created inertia on to tapping the keys of my MacBook and creating text with fervour. The late Air Cmde Jasjit Singh showed me the way. Air Mshl Vinod Patney gave me the absolute freedom, the wings, and the power to let go of my imagination. I feel immensely endowed having been associated with, and guided by, the two people who had—until I met them—been enigmas to me. I have lived a transformed life ever since I came to know them. I only wish I had gotten under the tutelage of my mentors earlier in life—I would have enjoyed this newfound passion and the journey longer.

Air Mshl KK Nohwar's appearance on the scene, when I started penning my thoughts, amounted to winning benediction. Painstakingly, he read and re-read my chapters and gave meaningful and creative suggestions to improve and garnish them. I shall always cherish the long drives from NOIDA to CAPS and back during which he used to share his thoughts on my work and encourage me. His contribution was suggestive rather than directive, always giving me the freedom to make choices. In the time that he devoted to my project, perhaps the former Vice Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS) could have written his own memoirs. All through the process, he displayed great patience despite my slow pace.

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of the conference with the prime minister was so vivid that I felt that I was a witness to the historical decision-making. Gen VP Malik (through emails) and Brig Vivek Sapatnekar (through his book, *Address C/O 56 APO: Location Unknown*) helped me with more details.

Lt Gens Vinod Bhatia and NPS Ghei; Maj Gen Harkirat Singh, Brigs RJS Dhillon, AK Sharma and GP Singh; Cols KL Sharma, Thomas Kochappan and KKK Singh; and Lt Col Gurinder Singh were rich repositories of the role of the paratroopers in the operation. Lt Gen Bhatia and Brig Dhillon, in particular, were ever so responsive to my queries and clarifications.

The officers of 17 PARA, 60 PARA and 411 PARA gave me access to their treasure troves of historical records. Not only did I feast on the available information, I also enjoyed their fine hospitality. A seminar organised by 6 PARA on Operation Cactus in November 2016 gave me an opportunity to listen to some of the veterans and interact with them. Brig SC Joshi was magnanimous in sharing a printout of his presentation. Maj Gen Bipin Bakshi was especially helpful in enabling me to sift the records of 411 PARA.

I have based my description of the role of the Indian Navy in the operation on an interview with Capt (IN) ARC Verma and a very vivid narrative by Cmde HA Gokhale (courtesy Gp Capt AG Bewoor). Articles by Adml Sushil Kumar and Cmde R Rai helped in corroborating some facts.

I had interacted with Brig FFC Bulsara during and immediately after the operation and had had insights into the brigade commander's mind. A chapter in Maj Gen Afsir Karim's *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* by Brig Bulsara, reconfirmed many details.

I have attended several spellbinding talks by Gp Capt AG Bewoor on Operation Cactus. Those talks, a long interview with Air Mshl Ashok K Goel, and an interview with Gp Capt RC Agrawal expanded my knowledge about the air aspects of

the operation. Gp Capt Bewoor has always been forthcoming in sharing information and satisfying queries through emails. My attempt to meet him during the course of this study was in vain. Gp Capt UK Gambhir threw light on some of the less known facts.

Air Mshl R Nambiar and Air Vice Marshal (AVM) JS Panesar gave detailed accounts of the involvement of the Battle Axes—the Mirage fighters. Wg Cdr Konark Goyal confirmed some finer details from the squadron diary.

Words are not enough to convey my feeling of gratitude to the set of fine people mentioned above (and some, whose names I may have omitted inadvertently) for giving me the most precious thing that anyone can give to anyone else—their precious TIME. I am indebted to them.

Among the protagonists were also the people (names not mentioned) who politely declined to share their knowledge on the antecedents. I value their personal reasons for not obliging me.

I owe my gratitude in equal measure to Dr Manpreet Sethi, who was my ready reckoner on nuances of publishing; and the duo of Rehana Mishra and Jose Mathew of KW Publishers who helped me give shape to this project.

My thanks are due to my sister, who taught me how to hold my first pencil; to two brothers who sacrificed everything they had so that I could be what I wanted to be, and a brother who introduced me to the world of bits, bytes and Microsoft Office. In a place I call my *sweet home*, Chhaya, Mudit, and an angel called Anjali who joined us rather late in life, were remarkably patient and the greatest source of encouragement during the seemingly endless gestation of this modest work. I value the encouragement of the rest of clans Chordia and Jindal.

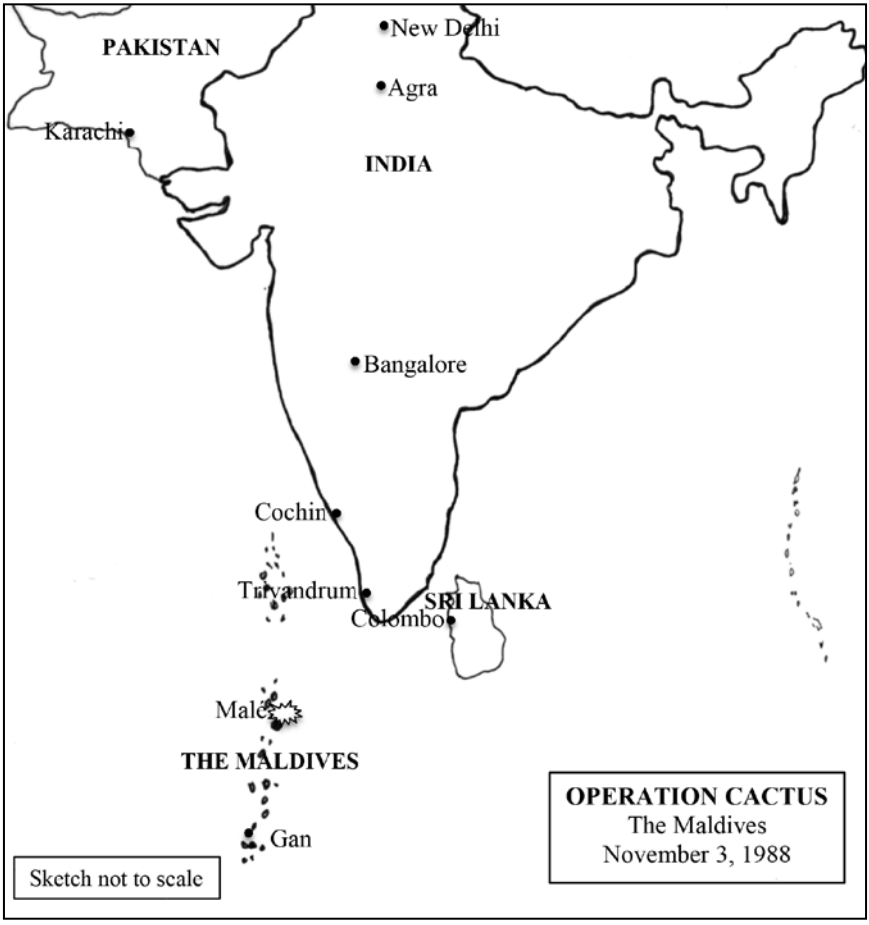
Most importantly, this work has seen the light of day due to the blessings of my beloved parents—being their son has been my biggest blessing and a matter of pride in my life.

List of Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
AAD	Automatic Activation Device
AATSS	Army Air Transport Support School
ACAS(Ops)	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations)
ACM	Air Chief Marshal
Adm	Administration/ Administrative
AFA	Air Force Academy
AFSO	Airfield Safety Operator
AGL	Above Ground Level
AHQ	Army Headquarters
Air Cmde	Air Commodore
Air HQ	Air Headquarters
Air Mshl	Air Marshal
airfd	airfield
AIWC	Airborne Individual Weapon Container
AMSL	Above Mean Sea Level
ATF	Aviation Turbine Fuel
AVM	Air Vice Marshal
BAUT	Boat Assault Universal Type
Bde	Brigade
Bde Cdr	Brigade Commander
BM	Brigade Major
Brig	Brigadier
Bty Cdr	Battery Commander
Cab Secy	Cabinet Secretary
Cantt	Cantonment
Capt	Captain
CFF	Combat Freefall
CI	Counter Insurgency/Chief Instructor
CO	Commanding Officer
COD	Central Ordnance Depot

Col	Colonel
Comd	Command
Comdt	Commandant
COO	Chief Operations Officer
Coy	Company
Coy Cdr	Company Commander
CRA	Canopy Release Assembly
DDGMO	Deputy Director General of Military Operations
DGMO	Director General Military Operations
FAT	Field Artillery Tractor
Fd Amb	Field Ambulance
FHQ	Führer Headquarters
Flt Lt	Flight Lieutenant
Gen	General
GoI	Government of India
Gp Capt	Group Captain
GSO	General Staff Officer
h	hour(s)
HAHO	High Altitude High Opening
HALO	High Altitude Low Opening
HAPPS	High Altitude Parachute Penetration System
HC	High Commissioner
HRMT	High Risk Mission Team
IAF	Indian Air Force
ILS	Instrument Landing System
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
JCO	Junior Commissioned Officer
Jt Secy	Joint Secretary
kL	kilo litre
LAMPS	Light Airborne Multipurpose System
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
Maj	Major
MARCOS	Marine Commandos

MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MO Dte	Military Operations Directorate
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MOUT	Military Operations in Urban Terrain
MR	Maritime Reconnaissance
NDA	National Defence Academy
NHQ	Naval Headquarters
NSG	National Security Guard
NSS	National Security Service
OBM	Outboard Motors
OD	Ordnance Depot
Op	Operation
OR	Other Rank
PA	Personal Assistant
PAE [Bag]	Paratrooper's Airborne Equipment [Bag]
Plt Offr	Pilot Officer
PPL	Private Pilot's Licence
PRTC	Parachute Regiment Training Centre
PS	Personal Secretary
PTRM [Parachute]	Paratrooper's Main [Parachute]
PTRR [Parachute]	Paratrooper's Reserve [Parachute]
PTS	Paratroopers Training School
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SATCO	Senior Air Traffic Control Officer
SEW	Safety Equipment Worker
SLR	Self-Loading Rifle
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
Sqn	Squadron
Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader
Sten MC	Sten Machine Carbine
Stn HQ	Station Headquarters
STOL	Short Take-Off and Landing
VTOL	Vertical Take-Off and Landing
Wg	Wing
Wg Cdr	Wing Commander
WO	Warrant Officer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New Delhi
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INDIA
Bangalore
Cochin
Trivandrum
SRI LANKA
Colombo
Male
THE MALDIVES
Gan
Sketch not to scale
OPERATION CACTUS
The Maldives
November 3, 1988

Introduction

Operation Cactus: Anatomy of One of India's Most Daring Military Operations, is the saga of men determined to achieve ends despite dire odds.

A coup attempt in the Maldives in November 1988 had sent President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom into hiding. Abdullah Luthufee, a Maldivian businessman, had joined hands with the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a Sri Lanka based separatist group, to execute his plan. Malé flashed desperate SOS messages to the US, UK, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan seeking military assistance. While the other countries took time to decide, India responded promptly with concrete action. Operation Cactus was launched at the behest of the besieged president.

On November 3, 1988, the author, then a flight lieutenant and a Parachute Jump Instructor (PJI), boarded an IL-76 aircraft. Like many in the aircraft, he was oblivious of the fact that he was going to participate in an operation of historical importance that would prove the prowess of the Indian military and diplomacy alike—an operation that would showcase India as an emerging regional power. Hours later, while still airborne and en route to the operational area, when the young officer learnt a little more about the mission, questions, like "Maldives? What is that? An island, or a country and where is it?" kept coming to mind. Ignorance was coupled with anxiety, as there were no maps of the area and only a somewhat vague idea of what needed to be done and why. The list of handicaps on the eve of the launch of Operation Cactus was long.

The decision to launch an airborne operation more than 2,500 km away in a relatively less known archipelago was a very difficult political and military choice. India's continued pre-occupation in

the peace-keeping operations in Sri Lanka must have weighed heavily on the Indian prime minister's mind. The advice and the confidence of the military leadership of the day perhaps enabled Prime Minister (PM) Rajiv Gandhi to give the *go ahead*.

The Indian troops had to reach President Gayoom before the rebels could find him on Malé Island. If by any chance, Luthufee's men were to find the president before the Indian troops, and if they could gain control of the capital, then the rescue operation would be construed as an *aggression*. The responsibility of prompt delivery of troops at Hulule airport rested with the Indian Air Force (IAF).

It was a cold start. In response to Delhi's clarion call, the paratroopers, the men in maroon berets, mustered and got into battle readiness expeditiously. The Indian Air Force lined up the requisite number of aircraft and promptly airlifted the paratroopers to the far-off Maldives. Would they reach the island nation in time? Would they encounter opposition on landing? Would they be able to rescue the president? The questions were many, and the answers few, if any.

Owing to the extreme uncertainties, most *pundits*, and scholars (of that time) would have forecast failure on the eve of the operation. Even today, views on the subject generally fringe on disdain. The reason for such indifference towards the operation is the absence of well-researched material on the subject. Very few people have penned articles and authored books trying to analyse the operation. The available literature throws light only on small segments of the operation. The views on Operation Cactus, devoid of facts and informed analysis, stand on soft ground. People continue to opine that the decision to embark on this mission was ill-informed and that it could have been avoided.

The fact is that the Indians did not sleepwalk into the Maldives. Despite inadequate intelligence, the decision was deliberate and sufficiently studied—contingencies had been catered for, including abandoning the operation and returning to Trivandrum, if the situation so demanded. The decision was followed by prompt

military action. The resources, and the capabilities were limited, but the ability to exploit those resources was tremendous––what was achieved was arguably the best that could have been done under those circumstances. What has been missing so far is knowledge and awareness of what exactly happened.

Fast-forward three decades. Gp Capt Chordia, now a senior fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) has pursued a seminal study on the operation. *Operation Cactus: Anatomy of One of India's Most Daring Military Operations,* is the result of his painstaking research of over two years at CAPS. He presents an unbiased history of the operation. The contents of the book are organised in three parts. The First Part (A Besieged President) presents the relative trivia—the first two chapters deal with the history, geography and politics of the country and what led to the crisis. The next two chapters titled, "Those Were the Days" and "Inertia on D-Day", transport the readers back in time to give them a feel of things as they existed then, in the late 1980s, and more specifically on November 3, 1988. The Second Part (Operation Cactus) deals with the operation—it is a pure narration of events. In Part Three, titled (Comprehending Cactus), the group captain analyses the operation. The chapter titled "Anatomy of Cactus" addresses the questions left unanswered by the pure narration of historical facts. In the chapter aptly titled: "Chhatri Mata ki Jai"—which is the battle cry of the Indian paratroopers and which translates as: "Long Live Goddess Parachute"—the author introduces the reader to the nuances of paratrooping. Striking similarities between Operation Cactus, on one side, and Operation Eiche (Italy, 1943) and Operation Thunderbolt (Entebbe, 1976), on the other, have been brought out in the chapter titled "Some Parallels." The chapter titled "Asides," is devoted to enthralling anecdotes associated with the operation.

In a short yet engaging Prologue, the author narrates events—separated by time and space—that had bearing on the outcome of the operation. An Epilogue likewise, throws light on a human

aspect of the operation. A Glossary serves as a ready reckoner for readers from a different background.

The research work presented in these pages is sourced mostly from the primary sources—gleaned from the protagonists through interviews, and the officer's own recollections. Unit histories and squadron diaries have been consulted to establish some of the facts. Other material available in the open domain—articles published in newspapers, journals and books—has been used to substantiate the research.

In these pages, the reader will find some issues, which have never appeared in print before. The history of Operation Cactus and its analysis has been presented in simple language. Parts of the description are in the first person as the author was a witness to most of what has been described.

Operation Cactus: Anatomy of One of India's Most Daring Military Operations underscores three fundamental issues: one, the success of military operations depends on innumerable factors. Two, all such factors cannot possibly align favourably, always. Three, success favours the bold who dare and act regardless of uncertainties. The book will give insights to a person in uniform interested in knowing military history. And because of its simple narration, devoid of military jargon, it will make interesting reading for others interested in knowing about military operations, especially Operation Cactus that must rank amongst the finest success stories of the Indian armed forces.

Gp Capt Chordia has written a book that will be read by military strategists, historians and the lay public as well. It has been a labour of love and the results are what can be expected of a labour of love.

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Preface

The past is the only reliable source of knowledge. History is not just how we study the past; it is how we study time itself.

— Niall Ferguson[1]

Operation Poomalai (Jaffna, Sri Lanka, June 4, 1987), sometimes known by the epithet: *Bread Bombing of Jaffna*, marked the beginning of the long drawn peace-keeping operation by the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. Then a flight lieutenant, I was a fully operational Parachute Jump Instructor (PJI) posted in the Paratroopers Training School (PTS), Agra. As the involvement of the IPKF in Sri Lanka grew, regular flight shuttles began between India and Sri Lanka. AN-32 and IL-76 aircraft ferried troops and supplies to bases in South India or directly to locations in Sri Lanka. As activity caught up that year, I spent a month in Sulur,[2] preparing for an airborne operation in support of the IPKF. We used to move to the airfield every morning and await instructions to get airborne. It was a long wait with no end in sight until the airborne operation was done away with and the troops were inducted into Sri Lanka in routine flights. Airlifts to and fro continued unabated; the frequency only increased with each passing day. In due course, southbound military transport aircraft epitomised IPKF operations in Sri Lanka. The days passed, regardless; a year went by like this.

November 3, 1988, was no different.

In PTS, it was business as usual. Live paratrooping training was in progress 11 km from the airfield. AN-32 aircraft were

1. Niall Ferguson, *Civilization, The West and the Rest* (London: Allen Lane/ Penguin Group, 2011), pp. xv-xxx.
2. An air base in South India.

dropping troops over the Malpura Drop Zone (DZ). Details of troops fitted with the indigenous Paratroopers Main (PTRM) parachutes waited for the aircraft to return for more sorties. I was off the jump/flying programme that morning as I had been detailed to lead the Akashganga[3] on the occasion of a skydiving demonstration as a part of the end-of-term Passing Out Parade at the National Defence Academy. The movement to Pune was put on hold and, in due course, I was assigned another task. There was no time or opportunity for a briefing. In the evening, I, along with another team of PJIs, emplaned an IL-76 aircraft parked on the 44 Squadron tarmac. Going by the *raison d'être* of PJIs on board any aircraft with paratroopers equipped for jumps, and the antecedents of the preceding months, we assumed that we were heading for the air base in Sulur/Trivandrum in the south to establish a mounting base [again] for an airborne operation later in Sri Lanka. The air was heavy with secrecy and urgency—information was either not available or, whatever little was available, was being shared on a *need-to-know* basis. The revelation that we were heading for the Maldives came much later, in flight. And, when I did come to know that we were going to land in the Maldives, I wasn't very sure where on Earth was a country by that name. The only thing that I could associate with the Maldives was the name of the sailor Ibn Battuta (or, perhaps Sindbad the Sailor?) of some childhood stories of adventurers on the high seas. I was not alone; sharing my ignorance were many others on board the aircraft who would have found it difficult to locate the Maldives on a map of the world.

The next 12 hours were eventful.

The Friendly Formation comprising two IL-76 aircraft got airborne as the sun went down behind the smog-filled skyline of Agra. With that take-off, we had embarked on a mission the likes

3. Akashaganga is the skydiving team of the IAF manned by the PJIs. The team undertakes demonstration jumps on ceremonial occasions for the motivation of cadets.

of which had no precedence in the military history of India; there was no previous experience, and no textbook approach.

Sketchy information is available about that operation in the open domain and very little has been written and published. Nonetheless, there are a few strong views and opinions about it. While some analysts have rated it as a daring operation, the opinion of some others fringes on cynicism. Notwithstanding the varied opinions, there are three striking things about Operation Cactus. One, there was great uncertainty on the eve of the operation. Two, the outcome was spectacular. And three, for the last three decades, people have been justifying the favourable outcome—it had to happen the way it happened. Operation Cactus was a *Black Swan Event*.

I consider myself one of those few lucky people who not only get the honour of donning a military uniform but also the rare opportunity to see action. I was a member of the team that participated in Operation Cactus and witness to a lot of what happened during that operation; it is etched permanently in my mind and has often made for interesting conversation. In 1998, I wrote an account of it in the *Air Force Journal*—a brief narration of my perceptions as a young officer. In contrast, *Operation Cactus: Anatomy of One of India's Most Daring Military Operations* is a much-researched work. It is the result of an in-depth study of the operation I undertook when I joined the Centre for Air Power Studies in February 2015. How from a state of inertia, the Indian Task Force got into top gear and accomplished an apparently impossible mission, is the subject of this book.

The book is based on my recollections and those of others who were involved directly in the operation, or associated with it in some capacity. In the process, I have met officers and men at all levels and have travelled back and forth in time to the momentous day. Those interactions with the participants opened the sluice gates to a wealth of information coated with nostalgia. It will be a misnomer on my part to call those conversations *interviews* because

most often they were monologues with me at the receiving end, listening—often too engrossed to ask questions. For most part, they have been my primary source of information and without exception, the participants were forthright and forthcoming with facts. Those interviews cleared many doubts and refined my perception. Blame my limited vocabulary for any shortcomings in the reproduction on paper of what I gleaned from them.

Memory fades with time. Three decades (almost) is long enough a period to erode the best of memories. But then, what remains in the far recesses of the mind after one forgets everything is what had had a deep impression on the mind at some point of time. Another advantage of recalling events after a prolonged pause is that a lot of haze gets dispelled with time. There is a disadvantage too—perceptions get reinforced and are recounted as events and facts. Operation Cactus was no different in these aspects—the intervening years had taken a toll of chronology, facts and figures. However, in each case, the time warp had propelled undistorted pictures of some incidents to the present day and time. Individuals recalled those residual memories with vividness—each one had a story to tell. There were contrasts in the pictures of the same event painted by different witnesses. I have used my discretion to accept or reject bits of information that I had doubts about and those that could not be corroborated. This, I have done to the chagrin of some of the protagonists. I only hope that some day they will come to understand my predicament. Needless to say, I have made a conscientious effort to keep my feelings and emotions at bay to avoid bias. I have referred to the ranks and designations of the people involved as they were at the time of the operation. Likewise, I have used the names of places as they existed then.

I must mention here that along the path, I came across individuals who, for reasons best known to them, declined to share the bit of history caged in their hearts. I respect their reasons for not opening up. What I have attributed to them is sourced

from the recollections of others. I regret inadvertent distortions, if any. I regret even more the fact that because of such attitude of people—of not sharing historical facts—some parts of history will end up as footnotes in my study.

I have rummaged through reams of papers and perused the available records, books and documents for the smallest crumbs of information. I have played and replayed long hours of audio recordings to recreate Operation Cactus and make military sense of the bit of history that I happened to be a part of. The few unit histories and squadron diaries that I could find were good sources of information. Visits to the PARA formations in Agra and browsing through their archives enabled me to delve into the minds of the maroon berets and see how they viewed Operation Cactus. The squadron diary of 44 Squadron was a cherished document that eluded me all through. Some bits of unclassified information including statistics were provided by the Air Headquarters. Old newspapers and magazines added to my repository of information. The History Division of the Ministry of Defence was constrained in as much as the records had not been de-classified. They could be perused only with the explicit permission of the concerned directorate—the Directorate of Military Operations, in this case. Then there was a rider—even if made available, they could not be cited at this stage. I chose to plough different, but not necessarily softer, ground for information.

There used to be a general belief that military history is created, written and read by men in uniform. No longer. Today, it is as much about the society as about the military. I expect the readership of this book to include at least half as many civilians as men in uniform. To that end, I have consciously avoided extensive use of military jargon and terminology. The warrior *pundits* might find this unprofessional.

Most books are organised in a linear fashion with the contents following some order and sequence. By contrast, this book is more like a tree—organised in three parts. Part II Operation Cactus forms

the trunk; chapters of Parts I and III form the branches, which are independent of each other and can be read in any order. For the benefit of the uninitiated but inquisitive reader interested in more than just skimming, I have included a chapter titled "Chhatri Mata ki Jai".[4] It is a need to know chapter on parachute jumps from an aircraft with special reference to jumps from IL-76 aircraft using the Russian D-5 parachute system. A knowledgeable reader may choose to skip the chapter. Simple explanations, definitions and some historical details of other airlifts have been included for correlation and better appreciation. A Glossary of Terms at the end of the book supplements the chapters.

I nurture no illusions about my ability to express myself in a language that is not my mother tongue. Therefore, the narrative is simple: the idea is to keep an interested reader tethered. In many places in the book, I have written in the first person because a lot of what I have described, I reiterate, happened in my presence. A sample of how I was going to write, elicited the following comments from our Director General (DG), Air Mshl Vinod Patney: "It is racy—reads like a Salman Rushdie novel."[5] There was a caveat though: "It's your work. You are free to present it the way you want to." For one who had been trained and groomed for 30 years to accept orders and do things *as-per-directions*, this was a precious liberty. Some others echoed the DG's observation and made me ponder a while. I was sure that although I wanted to use an easily comprehensible style, which most readers with different backgrounds could understand, I didn't want the work to resemble fiction. I have made a conscious effort to refurbish the style to be less *racy*. I have lost count of the number of times, Air Mshl KK Nohwar read and re-read pieces, and gave valuable suggestions to refine my work. His advice on how to keep the readers interested and to steer clear of avoidable controversies was particularly invaluable. I admire his eye for detail and his patience.

4. This is the battle cry of the Indian paratroopers.
5. Incidentally, I am yet to read a Salman Rushdie novel.

It is difficult to bring forth every detail of an operation just by interviewing people and reproducing the gist in a chronological order. I have included footnotes and textboxes to present the less organised information. Much as I tried, I could not avoid some repetitions and overlaps between chapters, which I felt were contextually relevant. The views and opinions expressed are my own. They do not represent the views of the Centre for Air Power Studies, or the Indian Air Force or any other organisation.

It would be rather difficult and unfair to look at the decisions and actions that were taken way back in 1988 through today's lens. The resources, both human and equipment, were different; the mindsets, because of those resources, were different and, hence, capabilities were different. The chapter titled "Those Were the Days," tries to bridge this gap. Notwithstanding this, I would advise my readers to pause occasionally while leafing through this book, and appreciate that the people who made Operation Cactus possible belonged to a different era; they faced different compulsions. It would be worthwhile to visualise how one would do the same things differently in today's circumstances given an understanding of Operation Cactus.

As I went about penning my thoughts, I received suggestions in the garb of innocuous questions: "How much can you write about an operation which lasted precisely 24 hours?" I countered: "How much had been written about Operation Thunderbolt in which the action lasted precisely 90 minutes?"[6] Are you analysing the reasons for the success?" Then there were questions that emerged from the narrative and remained unanswered: "Could the US have launched a mission from Diego Garcia? Why didn't we send some elements of the IPKF from Sri Lanka? That would have led to a more prompt action…." And then: "How can such a work be complete without a word about the Lessons Learnt?" I realised that authors of books of military history follow an

6. The 90-minute operation undertaken by the Israelis at Entebbe to rescue 104 hostages.

unwritten convention—to view a war or a military operation through a lens that focusses on the lessons learnt and magnifies the shortcomings. The effort is to point at *what not to do* to succeed in a similar situation in the future; the *to do* actions are taken for granted. Those questions and suggestions seemed to be nudging me in a direction. While some points were worth consideration, I had reservations about the one on Lessons Learnt. I believe that drawing and learning lessons is a very personal trait. Individuals, or groups of individuals, even countries, can draw entirely different lessons looking at a single event. Readers will find a chapter titled "Lessons Learnt," conspicuous by its absence.

Carrying the argument further, knowledge of the *Principles of War*, the *Art of War* and the theories propounded by military thinkers is one thing; trying to discover their application in every military operation is quite another. With some of us—those in the think-tank community, in particular—the latter is an obsession, to the extent that we struggle to look for a trace when perhaps none exists. The problem is endemic also to the strategic fraternity. Even with a good knowledge of wars and warfare, prediction of the outcome of the Operation Cactus by the *pundits* before its launch would have been difficult. At best, most would have forecast a debacle; the cumulative prediction errors about the result would have been monstrous.

Rumination on these thoughts and questions (read, "veiled suggestions") resulted in the inclusion of another chapter titled, "The Anatomy of Cactus." This chapter contains an analysis of the operation and answers to some straight questions that come to mind when one thinks of it. While I have affirmed my views, I am humbly conscious that there are no absolutes. I also know that some of my views will be discussed; some will be accepted, others shredded, and different views will surface. In the end, if what I write here satiates the desire to know about Operation Cactus, I would have achieved my aim of increasing awareness about that operation.

Many people, including most of us who took part in the operation, have called the elements who caused the trouble in the Maldives by different names: *terrorists, insurgents, mercenaries, rogues, rebels, hostiles*…. But, going by the definitions and meanings, none of those words truly describes them. Similarly, it is questionable whether it was a coup, a terrorist attack, or an instance of insurgency. There are shades of grey and I have not spent time on these issues. For most part of this book, I have, by choice, decided to use the word '*rebel*'. Occasionally, I have taken the liberty of using the other expressions too. There is no deliberate disregard for the nuanced meaning. I suppose this should not affect the facts, nor distort the meaning.

I wrote this book not only because I wanted to, but also because I felt it was needed. In the following pages, I have written about the events of that historical day as moments whizzed past more than a quarter of a century ago. I have attempted to portray the men involved with the objectivity of time. The simple aim is to be better prepared for a contingency in the future. The facts are open to multiple interpretations—I have made my choices and preferences. I have narrated the story as I saw it and perceived it. I have strived to project reality, although my perceptions might have tinted the picture in some ways. Kindly bear with me until someone paints a clearer picture. My purpose would be served even if the book whets the desire to seek more.

Howsoever spontaneous the actions might appear, Operation Cactus was conceived, planned and executed with much thought, taking into account the risks and stakes involved. It was a daring operation, indeed! This preface will not change the narrative. It would be imprudent to assume that the next such airlift/intervention will provide more favourable circumstances and, therefore, be as successful as Operation Cactus in the context of achievement of aim. Therefore, before we abandon ourselves to reveries that everything worked well, we should take a serious look at certain historical and doctrinal issues that influence

the understanding of such operations. Always, in hindsight, things can be done in a different way, if not better. I believe that realising what we can do better in the future is an important and integral part of the urge to truly understand the way we conduct operations and, therefore, the way to accomplish them more efficiently in the future. It is important to discover those *different* ways to accomplish another Cactus, another time and elsewhere—perhaps genetically modified, to be without the prickly spines. Somewhere there lies the essence of my effort.

The more than two-year-long journey—as I went about collecting and collating data and interviewing people and gleaning information from them—was as exciting and as gratifying as the operation itself. I have re-lived it through the process. I hope my effort enables a better understanding of Operation Cactus. As an author, I would consider my efforts rewarded if the urge to read this book comes from its description by word of mouth.

Here ends my adventure and, I hope, yours begins!

List of Leaflets

Prologue

Three events separated by time and space…

More than 200 years ago, on January 26, 1788, the first fleet of British ships, carrying convicts from Britain, entered Sydney harbour. The anniversary of that day is celebrated each year with fervour as Australia Day. The bicentenary of the official National Day of Australia was celebrated with even greater pomp and show through 1988. The Indian Navy (IN) was among the navies of the world invited to participate in the celebrations in October 1988. The crew of the Indian Naval Ship (INS) *Godavari* knew little of what awaited them on their cruise back to India.

In the latter half of the decade of the 1980s, the tourism minister of the Maldives was on a sojourn in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. During his tour, he called on Lt Gen TS Oberoi (Retd), a veteran paratrooper, who was then the lieutenant governor of the union territory. The minister presented him a coffee table book on the Maldives, which contained, besides beautiful pictures, some trivia about the islands. The old soldier passed on the souvenir to his son, Maj Harkirat Singh.[1]

Mr AK Banerjee, the High Commissioner (HC) of India to the Maldives had flown to New Delhi to assist the Ministry of External Affairs in preparing for a forthcoming visit of the Maldivian president in November 1988. The eventual cancellation of the presidential visit led the HC to avail a few days' leave to meet his personal commitments. His presence in Delhi was coincidental.

The presence of the INS *Godavari* in the Indian Ocean close to Sri Lanka; the availability of the coffee table book with Maj Harkirat Singh; and the Indian HC's presence in Delhi on November 3, 1988—among other factors—contributed significantly to the outcome of Operation Cactus.

1. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

A BESIEGED PRESIDENT

1

The Maldives: The Land and the People

Ours is a small country in relation to the majority of the countries that are represented here. We may lack in numbers; we may lack in material wealth; we may lack in technological advancement; in fact, we may lack in many of the material criteria by which progress is measured in the present-day world. But … my country, the Republic of Maldives, does not lack the courage to speak out freely according to its own convictions.

— President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom[1]
At the Sixth Non-aligned Conference at Havana
September 6, 1979.

Geography

The Maldives comprise about 1,190 low-lying coral islands[2] grouped in 26 atolls sprawled over nearly 90,000 sq km in the Indian Ocean.[3] The islands rest on a common plateau in the ocean and are distributed over nearly 800 km (north to south) between 7°N latitude and the equator and about 130 km at the widest point

1. Verinder Grover ed., *Maldives: Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep, 2000), p. v.
2. Ibid., p. 1.
3. Another record suggests that there are 2,000 islands; the ancient records speak of 12,000 islands. This number varies drastically from a source to another because of the differences in the definitions of terms like island, shoal, reef, atoll, archipelago, etc.

between the 72°E and the 74°E longitudes. Just about 200 of the Maldivian Islands are inhabited. While the density of population varies greatly from island to island, the basic needs of the people are the same—drinking water, food, shelter, communication, and boats for fishing and to commute between the islands. Meeting those elementary requirements, to a uniform level of satisfaction on all the islands, has been a Herculean task for successive governments.

The country is located 611 km[4] due south of Trivandrum, India. The distance from Colombo, Sri Lanka, in the northeast is 764 km. The island of Hulule with an international airport is located 2,598 km from Agra, which was the mounting base for Operation Cactus. The runway at Hulule, measuring 7,600 ft (in November 1988) was built by the Airports Authority of India.[5]

Diego Garcia, the British-US military base, is located 741 km south of the southern tip of the country. The distance between Diego Garcia and Malé is 1,285 km, which is less than half the distance between Agra and Hulule. Gan Island, in the southern atoll of Addu, also has a practically unused airfield with a runway, which was developed by the British to support military operations in the Asia-Pacific region during World War II.

The islands are small and low-lying—many not more than two metres (m) above sea level. They are devoid of hills, mountains, and rivers; there are white sandy beaches covered with tall coconut palms. Lagoons with crystal clear water attract tourists from all over the world. Some deep channels, which separate the atolls from each other, are navigable. The water table on the islands is fairly high; there are some fresh water lakes too.[6] Yet, a fairly large quantity of water needs treatment and desalination to meet

4. Unless otherwise stated, the distances between various locations in the Maldives and prominent places in the Indian subcontinent cited in the book have been taken from the Google maps. These distances differ—in some cases, considerably, from source to source.
5. Interview with Mr Ronen Sen. As per Maj Gen Harkirat Singh, the construction of the runway was done by Engineers India Ltd.
6. Grover, ed., n.1, p. xi.

the demand of potable water, which is ever increasing because of a thriving tourism industry. The failure of a water treatment plant in Malé in December 2014 had led to a major crisis, which was overcome with Indian assistance.[7]

Land and Life

The Maldivian Islands are small and are located far away from the mainland (Asia). This geographical attribute, coupled with the modest exploration capabilities of the first millennium, kept the country secluded from other parts of the world. Although not so close, the islands are closest to the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, the Dravidians of South India could possibly have been the earliest visitors and perhaps the first settlers and inhabitants of the islands. The Aryans from India and erstwhile Ceylon would possibly have followed suit. A similarity between Sinhalese and the Divehi language of the Maldivians suggests a Ceylonese influence on the people's language. A monograph on some Buddhist *stupas* in ruins on the islands by HCP Bell, the first archaeological commissioner of Ceylon, suggests that at some point of time in the history of the islands, people practised Buddhism.[8]

In 1153, King Darumavantu Rasgefanu converted to Islam and became Al Sultan Muhammed al'Adil. His subjects followed suit en masse. It is estimated that today 100 per cent of the Maldivian population of 3,30,000 are followers of the Muslim Sunni faith. CHB Reynolds observes: "It is indeed illegal to be anything else."[9] Water all around, and occasional inclement weather, makes life difficult on the islands; it limits the scope for earning a livelihood. A desperate struggle to eke out a living on the islands is evident—fishing and tourism are the two main

7. "Maldives Hit by Water Crisis, India Sends Help," PTI, online edition of *The Times of India,* dated December 5, 2014, available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Maldives-hit-by-water-crisis-India-sends-help/articleshow/45385033.cms. Accessed on December 7, 2014.
8. Grover ed., n.1, p. 14.
9. Ibid., p. 15.

vocations. A high dependence on tourism for livelihoods has unsurprisingly coerced the Maldives to adopt a rather diluted version of the *Sharia* law. The punishments for offences are not as severe as in some of the other countries that follow the *Sharia* law. Notwithstanding the economic status, the people have a sense of independence and security. An ordinary citizen normally sides with the National Security Service (NSS).

In the 1980s, the Maldives had a good up to date telephone communication system, both from one island to another within the Maldives, and from the Maldives to other countries all over the world—a British company operated it.

History

The recorded history of the Maldives covers the rule of Sultan Adil and later. Sometimes, shipwrecked European explorers and merchants, mainly Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English, strayed and took refuge on these islands. A few of them stayed on and accepted the life and culture of the locals. Ibn Battuta, a legendary Moroccan explorer, was one of the most well known visitors to Malé. He came to the islands via India (Calicut) in 1343.[10]

The Portuguese arrived in the early 1500s; they built a fort in Malé in 1519 and remained in occupation of the islands from 1558 to 1573. The southern island of Fek Maluka was visited by a French ship in 1529 and a Dutch ship in 1599. The first English visitors were wrecked in the Maldives in 1658. The Maldivians used to pay tribute to the Dutch and British governors in Ceylon but neither of them exercised actual control over the islands—the local population was left to defend itself against the occasional intruders. The French also kept a small detachment for some time.[11] As it happened in many other parts of the world, the European visitors—the Dutch, Portuguese, French, and British—occupied the islands for brief periods. A detailed

10. Ibid., p.16.
11. Ibid., p. 18.

history of those occupations is beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that the country became a British protectorate in 1887 and remained so until it gained full independence on July 26, 1965. In a referendum in March 1968, over 80 per cent of the population chose to replace the sultanate with a republic. "*The Republic of Maldive Islands*" came into being on November 11, 1968 and was renamed "*The Maldives*" in April 1969.

Recent History

The formation of a democratically elected government after a referendum in November 1968 marked the beginning of the *Second Republic*. Amir Ibrahim Nasir, who had been the prime minister since 1957, was elected the first president for a four-year term. He appointed Ahmed Zaki as the new prime minister. The Maldivian Constitution was amended (in 1972) during Nasir's regime. In 1973, Nasir was elected to a second term under the new provisions, which extended the presidential term to five years and also provided for the election of the prime minister by the *Majlis* (the Maldivian Parliament). In March 1975, there were rumours of Zaki being involved in an attempt to overthrow the president. Nasir proclaimed a national emergency and using the powers vested in him by the Constitution, dismissed Zaki; arrested and banished him to a remote atoll.[12]

Two events of the 1970s impacted the Maldivian economy adversely and led to the decline and fall of the Nasir government. They also marked the beginning of a period of uneasy peace and stability in the country. Firstly, the demand for the Maldivian dry fish in the Sri Lankan market dwindled, slowing down the inflow of foreign exchange. Secondly, the British closed their airfield on Gan Island in the mid-1970s in accordance with their policy of withdrawal from defence commitments east of the Suez Canal. Their presence on the island until then had been a source of revenue for the government and the locals, and a major source of

12. *Regional Surveys: The Far East and Australasia 2003,* available at http://books.google.co.in/books. Accused on August 11, 2015.

political stability for the country.[13] The British withdrawal spelt a commercial downslide for the Maldives. To mitigate the adverse effect, the Maldivians converted the island's military infrastructure into a garment factory.[14] From then on, in financial dire straits, democracy in Maldives was constantly under siege, witnessing a couple of attempted coups in the early 1980s. Nasir's government grew unpopular because of the inevitable changes. He fled to Singapore when his authoritarian rule ended abruptly in 1978.

In a peaceful election that year, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, with respectable credentials—education at Al Azhar University, Cairo, lecturership at a university and a stint as ambassador to the United Nations and as the minister of transport in the Nasir government—was elected president. This change of guard brought a precarious political stability in the country. It also promised economic prosperity as Gayoom focussed on developing the poorer islands. Due to his efforts, the Maldives joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). Tourism gained importance as more than 120,000 tourists came to the Maldives in 1985. People benefitted from the rapidly growing tourism industry. It also led to increase in foreign investments. There was, however, a small section of the population that felt that the country's prosperity was not being distributed equitably—some people were gaining more than others. Discontent simmered alongside the signs of development. In due course, a constituency came up whose dislike for Gayoom had grown exponentially.

Ahmed Naseem—Nasir's brother-in-law and a former junior minister—resented Gayoom's rise to power and vowed to depose him within six months. His frustration grew when the Parliament began investigating financial irregularities that

13. Sandeep Bhardwaj, "IPKF in Sri Lanka: Coup", *Revisiting India*, September 25, 2013, available at http://revisitingindia.com/2013/09/25/ipkf-in-sri-lanka-coup/. Accessed on September 16, 2015.
14. LK Sharma, "Relations with Malé Call for Care," *The Times of India*, November 24, 1988.

had occurred during Nasir's regime. Another issue that rankled Naseem was the enquiry into the torture and murder of inmates in the Villingili prison in the early 1970s, which implicated the erstwhile strongman Abdul Hannan Haleem, Nasir's minister for public safety. In 1980, he, along with some Nasir loyalists, hired nine British ex-Special Air Services mercenaries[15] to stage a coup to oust Gayoom. The group smuggled in light arms in diving equipment and arrived in the Maldives. They could not carry out the mission because Gayoom had been alerted about their arrival. In April 1981, Naseem was sentenced to life imprisonment for plotting to overthrow Gayoom.[16]

In the failure of the coup, there were lessons for both sides. For Gayoom: to be more vigilant. And for his opponents: to plan better, be more daring and, above all, to look for a more opportune moment.

In 1983, a local shipping businessman, Reeko Ibrahim Maniku made a bid to win the parliamentary nomination by offering bribes to members of Parliament and High Court judges. Unable to contain or counter Gayoom, he remained in self-imposed exile until 2006 and later registered the Social Democratic Party. Gayoom emerged stronger after both attempts to remove him; he received more than 90 per cent of the vote cast in 1983 and 1988. In 1985, the Maldives became one of the founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In September 1988, 51-year-old Gayoom began a third term as president, having won the election wherein he was the only candidate, again.

A month into his new term as the president, Gayoom would face yet another attempt to overthrow him. In planning and execution, it would be a more daring attempt than the two previous ones.

15. *Maldives: A Country Study–Security Concerns*, available at http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-8457.html. Accessed on August 11, 2015.
16. Ibid.

2

The Coup that Succeeded, Almost!

I wanted to get rid of Gayoom at any cost.

—Abdullah Luthufee[1]

The third, and the most daring, plot to overthrow Gayoom was the brainchild of a Maldivian businessman Abdullah Luthufee who abhorred Gayoom and his government, nursing a murderous hatred of the elected leader. Luthufee owned a duck farm at Kadawatha in Sri Lanka in the 1980s.[2] According to him, the Maldives had always been ruled by dictators and Gayoom's rule was the worst. In his interview published in *The Island*, he said, "Election process in my country never gave a reasonable opportunity to the opposition."[3] He felt the necessity of an outside force to overthrow Gayoom. He was fairly confident of succeeding in this because he believed that the Maldivians were an oppressed people and would not mind the ouster of Gayoom. He was confident of open support from a fair majority of the civilian population and tacit support of some

1. Shamindra Ferdinando, "Male Plot Leader Speaks out," *The Island*, November 2, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=38250. Accessed on October 22, 2013.
2. Shamindra Ferdinando, "How Luthufee Moved SAARC Venue from Male to Addu," *The Island*, November 10, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=38818. Accessed on October 16, 2016.
3. Based on the interview of Abdullah Luthufee to Shamindra Ferdinando in three issues of *The Island* published in November 2011.

personnel in the rank and file of the National Security Service (NSS) of the Maldives. In the 1980s, the Maldives did not have an army. The NSS was the epitome of everything that spelt security on the islands. It was a single force that served three purposes: the armed forces, the police, and the fire service. It had dealt with internal security and fire-fighting within the country but had not been bloodied in war, nor faced an external aggression.

Through his business interest in Sri Lanka, and his stay in that country, Lutufee had got acquainted with Uma Maheswaran, the leader of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).[4] He felt that his men, trained and experienced in fighting the Sri Lankan Army and the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF), would be able to defeat Gayoom's security apparatus. He made use of his friendship with Maheswaran to hatch a plot to overthrow Gayoom. They struck a deal for the deployment of 80 PLOTE cadres to raid Malé. Luthufee was also assured of, and counted on, the support of some military personnel in the Maldives—Abbas Ibrahim (an ex-major), Abdulla Shahid (an ex-corporal), Ahmed Nasir and Umar Jamaal, to name a few.[5]

Having lost ground to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), on the one hand, and having been hounded by the IPKF/Sri Lankan troops, on the other, Maheswaran was looking at tangible gains from the success of the coup. Maj RJS Dhillon of 6 PARA who stayed back in the Maldives as a member of an Indian Army team to restore normalcy, and had an opportunity to interact with the locals, says that the PLOTE was expecting a return gift from Luthufee for the support extended to him. As booty, Maheswaran was eyeing control of a few islands in the north of the archipelago to establish a base in the area—away from India and Sri Lanka. The base would enable the PLOTE to carry on with its exploits more freely: gun-running, gold smuggling and conducting other

4. The PLOTE was a breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).
5. Ferdinando, n.1.

nefarious activities.[6] While Mr JN Dixit, the Indian HC to Sri Lanka, also supported the view that Maheswaran was looking for some returns,[7] Luthufee, however, maintained that the PLOTE leader had no stake in the successful outcome of the coup.

Luthufee's true motive behind the daring raid is a subject of conjecture. It is not clear whether he wanted to assume power himself, or bring back to power ex-President Nasir. Brig Dhillon believes that Luthufee was the proverbial cat's paw in a bigger scheme of things.

Although discussions between Luthufee and Maheswaran began in 1987—around the time the IPKF commenced its operations in Sri Lanka—their planning and action took place in the last quarter of 1988. Taking a cue from the failure of earlier attempts to topple the government, the plotters looked for an opportune moment when the president would not be physically present in the Maldives to resist the takeover. A window of opportunity opened for them when the president decided to visit India in November 1988 on the occasion of the death anniversary of Mrs Indira Gandhi.

Once the plan for a seaborne assault had been firmed up, Luthufee gave up his lucrative business at the duck farm and came to a PLOTE base in Vavuniya for training. He trained for several weeks alongside the PLOTE cadres. The final planning for the plot was done on a poultry farm on the outskirts of Colombo.[8] Luthufee, along with another Maldivian, joined a contingent of PLOTE men on the Mollikulam beach on October 29, 1988. As per Sandeep Bhardwaj, the PLOTE cadres were *armed to the teeth*: they possessed heavy machine guns, AK-47 rifles, grenades and mortars.[9] Some other experts hold similar views about the

6. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.
7. JN Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (New Delhi: Konark, 1997), p. 263.
8. Dhillon, n.6.
9. Sandeep Bhardwaj, "IPKF in Sri Lanka: Coup", *Revisiting India*, September 25, 2013, available at http://revisitingindia.com/2013/09/25/ipkf-in-sri-lanka-coup/. Accessed on August 12, 2015.

arming of the rebels before the launch of the operation. For want of intelligence there were varying perceptions about the might of the rebels which influenced the decision-making, planning and preparation for the operation by the Indian Army.[10] According to the Indian High Commissioner Mr AK Banerjee, "They were rag-tag mercenaries."[11]

At about 2030 h, the team left the Sri Lankan shores and headed for the Maldives, huddled in two fishing trawlers. The aim was to synchronise the arrival of the trawlers in the Maldives with Gayoom's planned departure for India. The president's absence from Malé would make the takeover smooth and easy; it would strengthen the probability of the success of the coup. In addition to the men in the trawlers, some of Luthufee's men infiltrated the capital as innocuous visitors. A man called Vasanthi, appointed by Maheswaran, led the PLOTE cadres on that raid.

Meanwhile, President Gayoom cancelled his visit to India. A commonplace reason was cited for the sudden change in the programme. Much meaning was not attached to the cancellation at that time. But according to Mr AK Banerjee, perhaps President Gayoom had an inkling of what was brewing; the change of itinerary could have been pre-meditated.[12] As per one account, on November 4, 1988—a day after the coup—President Gayoom had stated on Radio Maldives that the Government of the Maldives had not received prior warning of the attack. But later, in his speech to the Maldivian Parliament, he had stated: "A person called Abdul Majeed Khalid had given prior warning of the attack to the Defence Minister Ilyas Ibrahim and the government had taken adequate steps based on that information and this is

10. The chapter titled "Anatomy of Cactus" explains how such perceptions and conjectures before the launch of Operation Cactus, influenced preparations for the operation.
11. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee.
12. Ibid.

the reason why the terrorists failed."[13] The heightened vigilance after the earlier coup attempts had paid some dividends by way of inputs reaching the Maldivians.

Once on the high seas, Luthufee and his men were cut off from the rest of the world. They were oblivious of the change in the president's programme. The trawlers reached Malé at 0430h on November 3, 1988. The boat ride of over 700 km from Colombo to Malé in crammed fishing trawlers had sapped the PLOTE cadres. Nearly four days at sea had depleted their stock of food and water; they needed food and water to satiate their hunger and quench their thirst. So, when they beached at Malé in the early hours of November 3, 1988, each individual had a small agenda beyond the collective task of invading the island—to rummage for eatables as they went along in pursuit of their *primary task*. Their need for food, water and rest was elementary yet had the power to distract them.[14]

The group secured the beach without a fight. Then they split up into small teams and headed for their designated objectives—the army barracks, the president's house and the deputy defence minister's residence. Luthufee was confident of an easy takeover. The plan ran smoothly until the PLOTE men assigned to seize the army barracks opened fire inadvertently. The firing alerted the camp and elicited counter fire. According to Luthufee, had the PLOTE cadres entered the barracks from a lightly guarded point, as directed, the majority would have thrown their weight behind the attackers. To begin with, capturing President Gayoom was *not* on the cards of the attackers because as per their last information, the president was visiting Delhi.

13. "Eyewitness Account of 1988 Coup Attempt and Aftermath," *Dhivehi Observer Maldives News*, November 3, 2004, available at http://doreview.blogspot.in/2007/11/eyewitness-account-of-1988-coup-attempt_04.html. Accessed on October 16, 2016.
14. For how this innocuous looking distraction could have influenced their objective, read chapter titled: "Anatomy of Cactus."

The invaders breached the wall of the NSS Headquarters but could not gain access into the complex. The only entry/exit of the compound remained under constant fire from the raiders leaving a number of the NSS men confined within the premises. Consequently, the NSS was unable to offer effectual resistance. The invaders suffered a setback when their leader, Vasanthi, was killed in the ensuing gun-battle[15] leaving the rebels devoid of effective command and control. The weapon toting invaders went about firing in the streets. The confused local populace vacated the streets and cowered indoors when the shootout erupted. The 30,000 odd inhabitants watched the *lungi-clad* rebels as they looted shops and collected booty. An eyewitness recounts, "At first, I thought it was a [*sic*] NSS exercise for the Republic Day celebrations."[16]

The PLOTE men did not realise the importance of the installations they had captured: the harbour, the power grid, and TV and radio stations. By noon, they were in control of almost the whole of Malé without having drawn much advantage from the infrastructure under their control. Luthufee even took time off to meet his mother.[17]

Luthufee's men who had entered the telephone exchange and smashed some of the equipment felt assured that they had disrupted all communication with the outside world. They did not realise that only the main power supply had been interrupted; the exchange was still functional on standby power supply. Thus, SOS messages could be sent to many countries all over the world. Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Sri Lanka and the US responded with offers of assistance.[18] According to TIME magazine, requests were made to the US and the UK too.

15. Bhardwaj, n.9.
16. Refer, n. 13.
17. Interview with Capt (IN) ARC Verma.
18. In his address to 1,200 guests after taking the oath of office for the third 5-year term, President Gayoom thanked those countries for offering assistance.

Washington and London took the request under consideration.[19] By the time realisation dawned on the invaders about the cancellation of the president's programmed visit to India, the leaderless men were scattered all over the island. It was rather difficult to muster them and send them in search of Gayoom. Besides, most of them did not know the president; they wouldn't have recognised him had they come face to face with him.

By not consolidating their hold on the islands, the PLOTE men gave the Indian Air Force (IAF) the critical time needed to airlift the troops to Hulule. After mid-day, though the PLOTE men were generally in control of the island, President Gayoom was still evading them.

19. Hafeez R Khan, "Rajiv Leaps into the Ocean," *Morning News*, November 17, 1988.

3

Those were the Days!

A simple narration of events in chronological order, even if it is supported by statistical data, cannot possibly transport a chunk of history across a quarter of a century and make it comprehensible to people at the other end. Developments—technological, in particular—make the understanding of history difficult. Even the best of descriptions can leave lingering questions in curious minds. Possibly a clever way to understand and appreciate history is to, first—before knowing what happened—travel back in time and get the feel of the environment in which things happened in *those days*. That simple step can remove a lot of the haze, and present a clearer picture.

The latter half of the decade of the 1980s had been momentous for the Indian armed forces. The paradrop of supplies for the civilians in the war ravaged Jaffna (Sri Lanka)—popularly known as the *bread bombing* of Jaffna (Operation Poomalai)—had led to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord. It also marked the beginning of the long drawn peace-keeping operation (Operation Pawan). There were frequent transport aircraft movements carrying supplies and men in and out of Sri Lanka to sustain the operations on the ground. Then, in mid-1987, a paradrop was contemplated, leading to preparation and a month-long wait in Sulur[1]—a contingent of paratroopers along with the Parachute Jump Instructors (PJIs) had marked time in

1. An air force base in southern India.

anticipation of the paradrop, which did not come through. In that instance, the paratroopers were inducted in routine sorties. Operation Poomalai, the long wait for a paradrop and the frequent movement of aircraft—all these and more, added up to create a perception: "All southbound aircraft movements are a part of Operation Pawan."

In the context of Operation Cactus, a re-visit to that point of time in history would be worthwhile because a lot has happened in the last three decades which has transformed the way the Indian armed forces look at, and deal with, crises. The following section is an effort to diminish the time gap between the late 1980s and the present by perambulating back in time and appreciating the then prevailing atmosphere. The aim is to capture the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s, which shaped Operation Cactus.

Want of a Quick Reaction Force

Today, there are more than a dozen agencies to deal with crisis situations related to national security, terrorism, insurgency and hostage situations. There are the Special Forces Battalions of the Indian Army, the Marine Commandos (MARCOS) of the Indian Navy and the Garuds of the IAF. Then there is the National Security Guard (NSG), the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) and other paramilitary forces. Together, they present focussed options for quick responses to an array of crisis situations. Prior to 1990, none of the three Services or the paramilitary forces in India had a designated Quick Reaction Force (QRF)—a force ready and set aside to respond at a short notice. The Special Forces Battalions of the Indian Army (1, 9 and 10 PARA SF) and the Marine Commando Force (MCF)[2], although adequately trained to handle varied crisis situations, were treated more like military entities to be used against an enemy country in a war or war-like situation. There were no contingency plans or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to

2. MCF, conceived in the mid-1980s, was christened Marine Commandos (MARCOS) in 1991.

deal with a situation the like of which developed suddenly in the Maldives on November 3, 1988. It was the first of its kind. It was a *cold start* of sorts; everything had to be done from scratch. The three Services, the diplomatic corps and all other agencies involved, worked together to meet the challenge.

Terrorism

Northern India, Punjab in particular, had gone through a period of disturbed peace and stability. The pro-Khalistan extremists had terrorised the civilian population of the region. Starting in the late 1970s, the menace had peaked in the early 1980s. Although the movement was on its last legs, sporadic acts of terrorism were still occurring. The threat of terror strikes was still a nagging issue, keeping the government and the security agencies occupied in an on-going fight against an invisible enemy. An intelligence report had warned about a strike by extremists on the Central Ordnance Depot (COD), Agra. An armed attack by the militants using Recoilless Guns (RCLs) was feared imminent. Any such warning in those days could not be ignored. To bolster the security to a desired level, two companies of 6 PARA Battalion had been deputed to provide armed security at the COD.[3]

On receiving the clarion call, when all its men were required by the brigade, there was a hiccup getting them back from the COD. Some arm-twisting went into getting the men released.

Response Time

Many time-consuming activities are involved in mobilising a unit or a formation from a state of peace-time inertia to a state of readiness to get into action or war. The time taken to switch between states is worked out on the basis of the activities involved. Recalling personnel, procuring the relevant maps of the area of operation and briefing men about the operation are some of the most important activities to begin with. Then, there is the need for

3. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.

calculating the requirement of arms, ammunition, rations, fuels, oils and lubricants. Mustering, and transporting, them to locations where they are required is the next important step. The locations could be different tarmacs on an airfield or a central location from where they can be distributed on the basis of need. These timings are worked out in peace-time; rehearsed and firmed up through exercises. A thorough knowledge of these timings enables efficient planning.

As per the (then) prevailing norms and SOPs, 50 (I) PARA Brigade could be activated with a three-day notice. After activation, they could stand by on a two-hour notice. Thus, theoretically, if the information about the coup reached the brigade at 0600h on November 3, 1988 (say), then going by the book, the earliest that the brigade should have been expected to depart from Agra was 0600h on November 6, 1988.[4]

Likewise, the time taken by the air force to take to the air, after a go ahead order is given, depends on many tangible and intangible factors. Making available the types and adequate numbers of aircraft required is the foremost issue. In the latter half of the decade of the 1980s, Agra had two squadrons of AN-32 aircraft and a squadron of IL-76 aircraft. On any given day, the aircraft of those squadrons were committed to undertake numerous tasks. A major task used to be ferrying troops and equipment in support of the IPKF in Sri Lanka. Other tasks included courier service to support the units and formations in the eastern and northern sectors, undertaking paratrooping training and occasional airlifts on demand by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other organisations. Considering that some aircraft would normally be under routine maintenance and some grounded temporarily for removal of snags, the number of aircraft available for additional commitments used to be less than three

4. Interview with Gen VN Sharma.

squadron strength. More aircraft could, however, be mustered by tapping the resources of the transport aircraft squadrons located in other parts of the country. Modifying each aircraft as per the role takes time—paradrop (personnel/ supply), troop carriage in *double deck* mode or *simple* cargo mode—and is possible only after the mission objective is known to the squadrons. The aircrew make conscientious calculations to strike a balance between the operational payload (troops/ ordnance/ supplies) and the fuel to be carried for the mission. In the end, getting the aircraft loaded with the army's paraphernalia is a major exercise. Returning to Operation Cactus, clarity on the airlift requirements—the tonnage and nature of the cargo, the mounting base, the destination and various timelines––was essential to ensure readiness of an adequate number of aircraft in time. Ships of the Indian Navy anchored in the different ports would take three to four days to travel to Malé.

In view of the resources and the usual commitments in those days, expecting a battalion group to get airborne in less than a day—after the executive orders to "go ahead" had been passed—amounted to *asking for the moon*, literally. How they still made it, on that occasion, is highly commendable.

Communication

Effective and secure voice communication, so important to military operations, was not a patch on what exists today. Point to point voice communication could be effected with landline phones or wireless sets. Personnel had to be called by messengers to attend telephone calls. A cordless phone instrument with a range of about 25 m was a luxury few could afford. Mobile phones were more than a decade away in the future; smartphones were further away on the timeline. One couldn't Whatsapp simple unclassified information, as is possible today. Video conferencing was not an option either. Satellite communication made a good subject for intellectual discussion.

The Subscriber's Trunk Dialling (STD) facility was authorised to a very few key appointments in units and formations. Senior officers, directors and above in the Service Headquarters (air commodores in the air force, and equivalent ranks in the army and navy in those days) and the Commanding Officers (COs) of independent units were provided with the facility. It was to be used with great discretion; records of the phone calls made from each instrument had to be kept meticulously. No wonder then that the telephones, with such facility activated on them, were kept physically locked. If and when any officer other than the commanding officer had to communicate on priority, he could do it only with due permission. Overseas communication was similarly handicapped. The telephone instruments were primitive too; the black, Bakelite instruments had a dial, which had to be rotated as many times as the number of digits in the subscribed telephone number. At the unit level, the *zero dial* facility on a phone was a privilege––only the key appointments could dial a civil number from their phone instrument. Others had to seek the assistance of the telephone operators manning the telephone exchange. Compared with today, one spent a lot more time on effecting the shortest of communications.

Uninterrupted clear real time communication across latitudes and longitudes was a bane. The protagonists manoeuvred past this nagging hurdle in their own smart and intelligent ways.

Communication at Sea

Real time communication at sea was also a pipe dream. The Indian Navy had issues with communication between a ship and bases on the land. When in visual range, they used the universally understood *Semaphore* system of signalling. For radio communication, a radio tradesman used to climb a perch on the mast of a ship at a given time twice a day (or more, if necessary) to receive coded messages transmitted from land-based signal centres. Those coded messages had to be interpreted by the tradesmen. A good amount of time was

spent in coding and decoding messages. Thus, the time taken for the message to reach a recipient could be much more if the signal traffic increased. Added to this, INS *Betwa* had an even tougher time with its communications because a majority of the communication crew on board comprised trainees from the Naval Signals School, still learning their skills. Howsoever hard they tried, the output couldn't match up with the need. As a result, the communication section was overloaded with coding and decoding task. This led to messages being delayed. Even the high priority *Ops Immediate* messages could take 3 to 4 hours to reach a ship on the high seas. A message that the rebels had Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) with a range of 500 m was deciphered and made available only after the ship had been operating in the proximity of the rebel ship for considerable time. That the rebels did not actually have that type of weaponry saved the day.

All civilian ships did not have long range signalling equipment. At close ranges, most ships resorted to radio communication—156.8 MHz (Channel 16) used to be the open frequency on which they could transmit and receive voice messages in real time.

Directive in *Black and White*

Task directives and operational orders form the basis on which a unit or a formation executes an operation. They convey the intentions of the commanders and the higher formations in *black and white*–to ensure adherence in letter and spirit. They are essential to ensure that all involved are on the same page and talk the same language. They follow a standard format as laid down in the Manual of Staff Duties (MSD) to ensure accuracy, brevity, clarity, relevance and logic. For reasons of security, only the required number of copies of each of such documents is printed; those are numbered serially and a record of the recipient of each copy is maintained most meticulously. Copies of such correspondence (orders, instructions and task directives) are often destroyed on completion of a task; and a confirmation is rendered to the authority that had issued the directive or the orders.

Those were the days of mechanical typewriters—the Remington types. Electronic typewriters, like the STD activated phones, were confined to the orderly rooms of the senior officers, mostly used for typing demi-official letters and letters of appreciation or commendations. It used to take long hours to produce legible and flawless documents. At best, five or six copies of a letter could be produced when thin (rice) paper and carbons were used. If more copies were required, one had to get a stencil cut and get the letter cyclostyled. Photocopiers were rare and were to be used with the approval of an appropriate authority on a written requisition.

Once orders were typed and signed, the documents—particularly those that were classified 'CONFIDENTIAL' or 'SECRET—had to be sent physically to the addressees. It could take a few days before written orders could be communicated from headquarters or higher formations to units.

The Pace of Work in General

Computers were a rare commodity—PC XT and PC XT 286 computers with 8 mB RAM and 512 mB hard disk were prized possessions. They were efficient machines of that era—one could switch "ON" a computer and wait for an eternity for it to boot. The popular operating system was the MS DOS. The applications, which made things possible were WordStar, Story Board, Picture Maker, dBase and Lotus 1-2-3. The most popular storage device was a 5¼-inch floppy disk. That much about the computer hardware—the issues with the computer trained human resource were equally daunting. There were stenographers who could type fast and accurately but to find one who could tap the keys on a computer's keyboard, half as deftly, was rare. That was the condition in the headquarters; the units (air force units, in particular) had barely started getting their first computers. Thus, an officer's (read, "a unit's") efficiency depended, to a good extent, on the availability of clerks who could type efficiently on conventional typewriters.

Excel Worksheets were not known to the loadmaster of an aircraft: he could not feed in values for range and fuel required, and work out load figures easily. He used a calculator to work with values—one situation at a time. There was no possibility of processing multiple scenarios through the *WHATIF* function.

The meaning of the Internet was known to a very few people in the scientific and strategic communities. The launch of the Internet in India by Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) for public use would take place six years later, on August 15, 1995. Netsurfing, for information was another pipe dream—the most elementary general information about cities (read tourist destinations) could not be obtained by tapping keys. It would be almost a decade later that people would coin the verb, "Google". Satellite imagery of an area of interest, in near real time—as is possible today—was not an option.

All these activities devoured precious time—they provided limited statistical support to decision-making and led to a slow pace of work.

Strategic Reach and Radius of Action

The IL-76 was the only transport aircraft in the inventory of the IAF with a respectable radius of action. It had the range and endurance to carry battle ready troops from Agra to Hulule (2,600 km away) and to return to Trivandrum in case landing at Hulule was not possible due to any reason. Other transport aircraft—AN-32, Avro and Mi-8 helicopters—could either operate from a base in the south or had to be refuelled before leaving the mainland. Landing by day at Hulule under *normal* circumstances—with the airfield under the control of the friendly forces—was not an issue. There were no Night Vision Devices (NVDs) for landing; night landing without landing aids was unimaginable.

Paradrop: Half of an Option

A paradrop had been considered as an option for delivery of troops

under certain circumstances. The only parachute that could be used for mass drops from the IL-76 aircraft was the Russian D-5 Parachute (with a Z-5 reserve). The parachute system had been inducted along with the IL-76 aircraft (in the mid-1980s). All the troops available in Agra on November 3, 1988, were not qualified on jumps from the IL-76 aircraft because training/ conversion of troops had moved at a slow pace. There were two fatal accidents in the first two years of their induction—their use had been suspended for several days after each accident, pending an inquiry.

There were several other major issues with the use of the D-5 parachutes and jumps from the IL-76 aircraft because of which a paradrop couldn't have been undertaken.[5] The *High Altitude High Opening (HAHO*) technique—the best mode, by far, for insertion—could have been an option but for the fact that night freefall had not been tried and practised. Besides, there were issues related to the Automatic Activation Devices (AAD) and the oxygen equipment.[6]

Security of Transport Aircraft in Hostile Air Space

In the planning stage, it was uncertain whether the IAF transport aircraft fleet would operate in a friendly or a hostile air space. In the latter case, the aircraft would need self-protection jammers/ weaponry to counter some of the threats. Besides, fighter escorts would be needed to neutralise any airborne threat. Two squadrons of the IAF, Nos. 1 and 7, based at Air Force Station, Maharajpur (Gwalior), had been re-equipped with the French Mirage 2000 delta-wing fly-by-wire fighter with high agility and a formidable radar/ missile combination. The first batch of pilots and technicians had been trained at Mont de Marsan and had ferried them from France in the summer of 1985.[7] Within a year

5. Chapter titled "Chhatri Mata ki Jai," elucidates on the delivery of troops by air.
6. The nuances of parachute jumps with the D-5 parachutes and HAHO have been elaborated upon in the chapter titled "Chhatri Mata ki Jai."
7. "History of IAF" on the official website of the IAF, available at http://indianairforce.nic.in. Accessed on May 18, 2015.

of their induction, the Mirages had been baptised in war-like conditions, in Sri Lanka. They had escorted the formation of AN-32 aircraft during Operation Poomalai. For the Mirage pilots, to repeat the Jaffna act in the Maldives was simply a "*ditto*."

An Air Base too Far

44 Squadron was based at Air Force Station, Kheria, which, was located about 5-6 km from the Army Cantonment where the PARA Brigade and its units were situated. Connecting the two locations was a narrow road with an equally narrow bridge over railway tracks. This bridge had to be crossed every time one had to travel from one location to the other. On normal days, the distance could be covered in very little time. Sometimes, there used to be traffic jams caused by slow moving vehicles, including cycle rickshaws.

On that November day, whether or not the troops would make it in time for the mission would depend, among other things, on the vehicles not getting caught in a traffic snarl.

4

Inertia on D-Day

If the Maldivians were caught with their trousers at ankle level,
50 Bde's, at best, were half-mast.

— Brig FFC Bulsara[1]

Deepawali was a week ahead; a period of festivities had begun. A good number of personnel were on leave. Those on duty were going about their chores as a matter of routine. The people who would be spending the next 24 hours on their feet, and who would be expected to take crucial decisions, prepare and act to counter an adversary whose strength and fighting abilities would either remain obscure, or would be perceived with magnification, were present in places separated by latitudes and longitudes. They were dispersed from Delhi to Agra, to Allahabad, and Patna. Those present in Agra too were widely scattered. Mustering, briefing and directing them would be a mammoth exercise. Overcoming the inertia on November 3, 1988, would be an important first step towards the success of Operation Cactus. Here is a close look at the state of affairs on D-Day.

1. Brig FFC Bulsara to the author after the operation. Also cited in Afsir Karim, ed., *The Story of India's Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1993), p. 208.

Scattered Leadership

When the first reports of the crisis came in, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was on a tour of Calcutta and Patna. It would take about four hours before he could reach Delhi to take stock of the situation. The Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), Air Chief Marshal (ACM) SK Mehra, was abroad on a temporary duty to the US. Air Mshl NC Suri, the Vice Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS) was at the helm, as the officiating CAS. Adm J G Nadkarni, the Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) was also abroad; officiating in his place was VAdm G Hiranandani, the Vice Chief of the Naval Staff (VCNS).

Air Cmde HS Sahota, the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) (No. 4 Wing at Agra) was away, at Allahabad, attending a conference at Headquarters Central Air Command (HQ CAC). Gp Capt BK Sunder,[2] the Chief Operations Officer (COO) was officiating as the station commander.

Wg Cdr AV Vaidya, the squadron commander of No. 7 Squadron, was attending a briefing for a forthcoming exercise (Exercise Suraksha) in Allahabad. Hours later, he would be flying his Mirage fighter aircraft to Trivandrum. And the next day, he would be leading a formation of Mirage fighters as a part of Operation Cactus.

50 (I) PARA Brigade

50 (I) PARA Brigade (Bde) was preparing for its first ever Annual Inspection. Prior to November 1988, only the units under the brigade were subjected to Administrative (Adm) Inspections by the higher formations; the Brigade HQ was exempted. In the new scheme of things, the brigade's book inspection was scheduled for November 3, 1988, and the detailed Annual Inspection was to take place on the following day. Maj Vinod Bhatia, the brigade major, was getting the books of accounts/records and the long forgotten ledgers updated. Men were going through the ritual of

2. A year earlier, Gp Capt BK Sunder had led the bread bombing of Jaffna in support of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

painting, polishing, and shining that are so much a part of any inspection.

On the night of November 2/3, a group of young officers (lieutenants and captains) had called on the Brigade Commander, Brig FFC Bulsara. The officers, who were former gentlemen cadets (at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun) under Bulsara, stayed on for supper which carried on till the early hours of the morning. After stealing a few winks, Bulsara joined his deputy, Col A K Chakrabarty to visit the Ordnance Field Park (OFP). A cadre was in progress at the park. He took the opportunity to witness some platforms and loads prepared for paradrops. He wasn't in his office when the first telephone calls were received. On his way back from the OFP, he visited the 60 PARA Field Ambulance. In his absence, Maj Vinod Bhatia, the brigade major, received the first information and instructions that flowed directly from the Vice Chief of the Army Staff (VCOAS), Lt Gen SF Rodrigues from Army Headquarters (AHQ).

Trials and Tribulations of the DQ[3]

The DQ of the brigade, Maj Harkirat Singh, was representing the Brigade HQ as a member at a Quartering Committee Meeting chaired by Brig RP Limaye, the commandant of the Parachute Regimental Training Centre (PRTC). At 0730 hrs, he was in the Station HQ—a four-minute walk from the Brigade HQ—deciding the allocation of accommodation to the married officers. He left the meeting half way when he received the message to get to the Brigade HQ at the earliest.

Moving the brigade with all its paraphernalia from its location in Agra Cantonment to Air Force (AF) Station in Kheria would be a monumental task even in peace-time. Maj Harkirat Singh estimated the requirement of 40 vehicles to accomplish the move

3. Commonly addressed as, "DQ", the deputy assistant adjutant and quarter master general is the key officer responsible for the adjutant (discipline) and quarter master (supplies) functions.

smoothly in two shifts of about 90 minutes. But that morning, the transport company had only 32 vehicles on its strength—of those vehicles, six vehicles had been allocated for station duties, four were on school bus duties and the remaining on outstation duties. Thus, only two vehicles were available instantly. The vehicles on outstation duties were way beyond reach and could not have been mustered in quick time.[4]

6 PARA

6 PARA was designated to lead the operation but the unit's troops were scattered far and wide. Charlie Company had finished the individual training cycle three days earlier; it was the *duty company*. Its troops had gone to collect stores that had arrived at the two railway stations at Idgah and Cantonment (Cantt). Another team was getting stores issued at the Central Ordnance Depot (COD). As mentioned earlier, intelligence reports had suggested that the COD was a possible target of attack from extremists using RCL guns. Two companies of 6 PARA had been deputed to bolster security at the COD.

A formal inspection of the unit's Mechanical Transport (MT) was under way. All of the unit's vehicles, other than those on essential duties, had been cleaned and lined up. The effective strength of Charlie Company that morning was: one officer, one Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) and two Other Ranks (ORs).[5] Maj RJS Dhillon, the company commander, was in a hurry to complete the after training report—he was to proceed on leave the next day. Col SC Joshi, the CO too, was to proceed to Bagdogra on leave, the next day.

7 PARA

7 PARA had been designated for deployment in the northeast. The brigade commander had sent them on an exercise to prepare them

4. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.
5. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon

for their deployment in the jungles. The battalion was sharpening its jungle warfare skills at Band Baretha, in Rajasthan.

3 PARA

Col KL Sharma, the CO of 3 PARA was away reconnoitring a drop zone for an airborne exercise. His whereabouts were not known; he could not be contacted. A company of 3 PARA was providing guards and security to the Command House and establishments in Lucknow.

17 PARA: Zojila Day Hangover

17 PARA Field Artillery Regiment had celebrated the Zojila Day on October 31 and November 1, 1988. It was an annual event to commemorate the role of the unit in the capture of Zoji La Pass in 1948. It was a hectic 2-day celebration in which the unit's officers and men had played host to a large number of guests who included serving officers/ jawans and veterans. The unit had worked really hard to make the celebration a success. Pleased with their performance, Lt Col KKK Singh, the commanding officer, had declared November 3, 1988, as Administration Day (Adm Day) which meant that except for the staff of the second-in-command and the adjutant, all others were observing a day's well-earned '*leave*'. While some men were busy dismantling the structures erected for the Zojila Day celebration, others were scattered from the unit lines to Sadar Bazaar, trying to make the best of the holiday.

The regiment was handicapped for want of mechanical transport too. Four of its seven 3-tonne transports were over 60 km away, in Bharatpur. Nearly 80 per cent of its one-tonne vehicles were off road, being serviced for an impending inspection.

At 1100h, the commanding officer was in a conference at the Station HQ with the Administration Commandant (Adm Comdt) while the Second-in-Command, Maj MS Gill was attending a Housing Board meeting.[6]

6. 17 Parachute Field Regiment History, 1988.

411 PARA Field Engineers

411 PARA field engineers were also preparing for an inspection. Capt MJ Kumar was down with viral fever. Capt Praveen Sundar had just completed his probation and had earned the maroon beret that very day; he was yet to qualify as a paratrooper. To add to it, he was attending a heavy drop course at Army Air Transport Support School (AATSS). Effectively, on that day, Maj K Babayya, the CO, was the lone (officer) paratrooper available to deal with any operational requirement.[7]

Parachute Jump Instructors (PJIs): On a Different Trip

The Paratroopers Training School (PTS) had a role to play since a paradrop was contemplated as an alternative to airlanding of troops. The presence of PJIs on board the IL-76 aircraft would be mandatory if a paradrop were to be undertaken; they would prepare the troops and despatch them from the aircraft.

The PTS and its PJIs were oblivious of what was brewing across the runway, in 44 Squadron or in 50 (I) PARA Brigade. Paratrooping ground training was in progress in the training hangar and live jumps were in progress 11 km away—over the Malpura Drop Zone. PJIs were manning their posts at all the stations.

Scheduled on the flying programme of PTS that morning was also the departure of the Akashganga[8] to Khadakwasla for a sky-diving demonstration jump at the National Defence Academy (NDA) on the occasion of the passing out parade of the 75th NDA Course. I was to lead the team. The parachutes, the jump helmets and other equipment, along with our personal baggage, had been stacked neatly on the tarmac, to be loaded in an AN-32 aircraft.[9]

7. Unit Records of 411 Parachute Field Company (Engineers).
8. Inaugurated a year earlier, the Akashganga was the IAF's skydiving team, which used to undertake demonstration jumps at training establishments to motivate the cadets and to instil in them a spirit of adventure. Skydiving demonstrations were a spinoff of the capabilities of the PJIs as Combat Free Fall (CFF) Instructors.
9. The scheduled departure was 0800 hrs.

Going by the antecedents of the year gone by, it was a foregone conclusion that instead of NDA, Khadakwasla, we were now heading for another commitment as a part of Operation Pawan. We thought that it would be an airlift to a mounting base (may be, Sulur again) for a paradrop in Sri Lanka later. So, we, the PJIs, packed our aircrew bags for a long stay down south and loaded them into the aircraft. Had we known that we were heading for the Maldives—straight into the action—we would not have carried our personal baggage into the aircraft. This excess baggage was avoidable.

AN Elusive Controller

It had been feared that the routine Air Traffic Control (ATC) services in Hulule could be disrupted. Therefore, a need was felt to take a controller, along with the necessary equipment and support staff. Pilot Officer (Plt Offr) UK Gambhir who was deputed to head the team of Airfield Safety Operators (AFSOs) was off duty after spending a night on duty in the control tower. He was not in his room in the Officers' Mess either. The room orderly said that he had been requested by the mess secretary to go to Sadar Bazaar in Agra Cantt to buy sweets and crackers for the Diwali celebrations in the Officers' Mess. In those days, when mobile phones did not exist even in the imagination, getting him back in time would require special ingenuity.

Landline Communication: A Let/Down

At a time when real time communication was a dire need, the brigade's (direct) phone line to Army Headquarters had developed a fault. The communication between the two formations was through Mathura on secure lines. Calls had to be patched and took more time than normal to materialise.

Refuelling: Satiating the Mighty Jets

Agra being a premier transport aircraft base, the refuelling requirement was large. The number of bowsers available was

adequate to meet the routine peace-time requirements. They had been operating at their peak performance due to the increased commitment as a part of Operation Pawan. The operational plan for Operation Cactus took time to firm up. Initially, in the minds of the people, it was a given that the formation would touchdown and refuel en route (at Trivandrum or Sulur). As per calculations, 40 tonnes of Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) per aircraft was sufficient to reach Trivandrum. This would cater for a diversion en route, to Bangalore.[10]

However, when it was decided to attempt a direct landing at Hulule, the requirement of ATF shot up to 62 tonnes per aircraft. For three aircraft, the additional requirement[11] totalled a whopping 66 tonnes! With the capacity of a fuel bowser being 12 to 18 kilo litres, several to and fro shuttles would be required between 44 Squadron and the Indian Oil Corporation's (IOC's) dispensing point located about 4 km away. It was going to be a logistics nightmare for Gp Capt G Gururani, the chief engineering officer of 4 Wing Air Force.

The Parachute State

4 Wing Air Force (Agra) was responsible for providing an adequate number of freshly serviced parachutes for the paradrop. Each parachute should have been serviced and packed not earlier than three months from the date of the jump and had to be fitted with an Automatic Activation Device (AAD).[12] The paradrop of the full brigade from the IL-76 aircraft would require close to 1,000 parachutes. About 1,600 parachutes were on the inventory of 4 Wing; the remaining parachutes were in the training stock of PTS. Due to commitments in Sri Lanka, the troops and the IL-76 aircraft both were not readily available for training and jumps. As such,

10. The meteorological data and the forecast suggested bad weather en route. Diversion to Bangalore was catered to meet such a contingency.
11. Assuming that each aircraft already had 40 tonnes of ATF.
12. The Automatic Activation Device (AAD), the Russian KAP 3P, was an essential component of the D-5 parachute, without which jumps could not be authorised.

the parachutes had been opened for maintenance and had been suspended for drying.

Close to 500 D-5 parachutes (less AADs) were available in a packed state. Assuming that more than six work hours were available before the task force would get airborne at 1800h, it was possible for the 400 odd Safety Equipment Workers (SEWs)[13] to pack more parachutes. Gp Capt Gururani was confident of meeting the full requirement of parachutes by the next morning but Brig Bulsara had doubts.[14] In due course, it was revealed that only 65 AADs were available and, hence, only that many parachutes could be used for live jumps. Finally, those 65 D-5 parachutes were taken on board the lead aircraft to prepare for the contingency of a paradrop.

The Odds

Looking at the inertia on the D-Day, most *pundits* would have doubted the success of the operation; bookies would have bet their lives on the failure of the operation.

13. The parachute packers, riggers and supervisors.
14. Karim, ed., n. 1, p. 209.

OPERATION CACTUS

5

Clarion Call at Reveille!

A Pebble Generates Waves

New Delhi, November 3, 1988. Time: 0600–0630h.

An overseas telephone call on that November morning impelled Kuldeep Sahdev into action.[1] One of the staff members of the Indian High Commission in Malé had sounded panic-stricken. He told Sahdev that seaborne raiders had attacked Malé in the wee hours of the morning; there was firing in the streets. He could hear an occasional fusillade of rounds being fired by the raiders who appeared to be Sri Lankan Tamils. They had attacked prominent buildings: the president's residence, the headquarters of the National Security Service (NSS) and the radio and TV stations, to name a few. They had disrupted the supply of water and electricity. President Gayoom had gone into hiding and the city was under siege. A request for assistance had come from the president through the Maldivian Foreign Secretary, Ibrahim Hussein Zaki.

Sahdev made some immediate phone calls. Ronendra Sen,[2] a joint secretary in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was among the first few to be spoken to.

1. Kuldip Sahdev was the joint secretary, Burma, Sri Lanka & Maldives (BSM) in the Foreign Ministry, Government of India.
2. Ambassador Ronendra Sen was popularly known as Ronen Sen.

A Fortuitous Presence

It was coincidental that Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian High Commissioner (HC) to the Maldives was in India on that day. He had been asked by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to fly down to New Delhi prior to the scheduled arrival of President Gayoom later in the week, to assist in the preparations. It was a ritual that precedes the visit of a foreign head of state.[3] But the president's visit got deferred unexpectedly to a later date for some commonplace reason. Gayoom had personally called the Indian prime minister to request the change. According to Banerjee, President Gayoom had an inkling of the conspiracy to overthrow his government. The deliberate decision to call off the visit was based on intelligence inputs.[4] Since Banerjee had already reported on duty in Delhi, he availed of short leave to meet his personal commitments.

The coincidental presence of the HC in Delhi on that day, turned out to be fortuitous, as proved by the events that unfolded later.

Like Sahdev, Banerjee was among the first few in India who got to know of the deteriorating situation in the Maldives. He too was shaken awake by an unexpected call from Malé around the same time. The petrified *chargé d'affaires* at the other end of the line mumbled that there was mayhem in Malé; gun-toting men who appeared to be Sri Lankan Tamils, had been shooting all over the place since 0430h. They were killing people whose meek, unarmed resistance was insufficient to stop the armed men. The government had gone into hiding and was in a desperate state; the president had sent a personal request for help. For a brief moment, the HC wondered if it was a prank.[5] A quick replay of the mental recording of the conversation cleared his doubts. The hushed trembling voice was unmistakably that of his staff. The urgency in the tone and the content of the message confirmed

3. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee, then Indian high commissioner to the Maldives.
4. Chapter titled, "The Coup that Succeeded, Almost!" gives details of the coup.
5. Refer to n. 3.

that it was a real crisis. The Indian High Commission in Malé was getting bits of information from Anbaree Sattar, the chief security officer of President Gayoom.[6] Since the HC was in Delhi, the Maldivians, as also the staff of the High Commission looked up to him to do something to provide succour.

At that instant, concern for the safety of his staff topped the list of the HC's priorities. He told the caller to secure the premises as best as they could; everyone to stay indoors; and continue to communicate developments, if and when possible. His next big concern was to process the request of the Maldivian government for assistance.

Urgency Permeates Delhi Air

Around the time when Banerjee was getting the import of the message and mulling over possible actions, Sahdev was getting to know more about the situation in the Maldives. He was contemplating a diplomatic response. But, in his assessment, military intervention was an option too. The IPKF operations in Sri Lanka had given him numerous opportunities to interact with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the three Services. Those interactions had led to awareness about military operations and familiarity with related people in different departments and offices of the armed forces and the MoD.

A year earlier, in July 1987—close to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, when President JR Jayewardene and his family were threatened—Sahdev had been a member of the core group that had conceived a contingency plan to rescue the *first family*.[7] The need to rescue President Gayoom was an identical situation. The difference was that in the case of the Maldivian president, the rescue would have to go beyond the stage of planning—to execution. Sahdev told Ronen Sen that Ibrahim

6. Anbaree Sattar, a trusted officer of President Gayoom, retired as a lieutenant general. After retirement, he was a minister in Gayoom's government. He headed the first resident mission of Maldives in India (2004-09).
7. JN Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (New Delhi: Konark, 1997), p. 143.

Zaki, the Maldivian foreign secretary[8] had called to say that the situation in the Maldives was volatile; armed militia had landed there. It was a coup of sorts but foreigners were also involved. They were targeting the president who had sent an SOS message from Malé.[9]

On that day, the Indian Prime Minister (PM), Mr Rajiv Gandhi was away on a planned visit to Patna and Calcutta. Sahdev suggested that Sen could inform the PM and until the latter returned to Delhi, the two of them could monitor the developments and line up responses for him to choose from. They felt that any decision to provide military assistance would entail positioning of men and material resources either across in the Maldives, or to a location in India, close to those islands. Since time was at a premium, airlift would be the ideal mode of transportation. Although an airborne operation to rescue the president was not a decision yet, they felt that alerting the air force and the army about what was brewing would stand them in good stead if, and when, a decision to move troops was taken.

PM Revises his Itinerary

Ronen Sen was a trouble-shooter, handling tricky situations with a great sense of responsibility for PM Rajiv Gandhi. He could analyse the lie of the land, visualise options and think well ahead of the present. He was respected for his professionalism.[10] Armed with the necessary information, Sen called the PM in Patna and briefed him about the development in the Maldives and the immediate actions that Sahdev and he had taken. They discussed the issue at length. The PM took cognisance of the inputs and gave unambiguous instructions: to gather more information and to organise a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in the Ops Room of AHQ in South Block. "Rajiv Gandhi believed in going to the people

8. Ibrahim Zaki later became a minister in the Gayoom government. Still later, he joined the opposition.
9. Interview with Mr Ronen Sen.
10. An opinion expressed by most of the people who know him.

rather than calling them over," opines Sen. Following his telephonic conversation with the PM, Sen too made some quick telephone calls. He got the secretaries of the Press, Cabinet and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) on board.

From Patna, the PM was scheduled to travel to Calcutta. He revised his itinerary and set course for Delhi. Sen updated Sahdev on the scheduled meeting with the PM and requested him to be present in the Ops Room.

In a while, the HC called Sahdev. He wasn't surprised when the latter told him that the chargé d´affaires in the Indian High Commission in Malé, as also Zaki, had already apprised him of the crisis. Sahdev requested him to be present in the Ops Room at 1100h for discussion with the PM.

The Longest Overseas Telephone Call

Back in the Maldives the mercenaries, on a shooting spree, had damaged and destroyed shops, infrastructure and the public services that came their way. They had caused havoc in the telephone exchange at Malé, firing indiscriminately at the equipment. They thought that they had rendered the communication system unusable. They were unaware that what they had damaged was the power supply to the equipment; the heart of the system was still beating. They also overlooked the fact that standby power supply was available. Therefore, the disruption in the communication was only partial and temporary; the telephone lines remained functional on standby power.

The link between Malé and New Delhi—the overseas telephone line through satellite—between Ibrahim Zaki and Ronen Sen was alive too. But there was no guarantee that that lifeline would remain intact through the operation. A break would cause information blackout, which, in turn, would jeopardise the Indian effort to rescue Gayoom. It would be an equally bad situation if the person at the Malé-end of the line were to be communicating under duress.

Ronen Sen told Zaki not to disconnect his telephone call to 7, Race Course Road (RCR).[11] He advised him to keep the line alive and man it all the time. Between them, they decided some spoken codes (clichés), which Zaki, or his aide would use in their subsequent conversation if they were overrun by the rebels and were threatened to pass false information at gunpoint. This arrangement worked very well. The telephone line between Zaki in Malé and the office of Vincent George[12] in 7 RCR was not hung up—people at the two ends continued to exchange information on that line non-stop into the wee hours of the next morning. It was perhaps the longest overseas telephone call since the invention of the device by Graham Bell more than a hundred years ago. It lasted nearly 20 hours.[13]

Ronen Sen Alerts Gen VN Sharma

Sen began doing the spadework on the possible actions that he could suggest to the PM on his return. As he had discussed with Sahdev, the armed forces would be involved if India decided to provide assistance beyond diplomatic lip-service. He spoke to Gen VN Sharma, the COAS, and apprised him of the situation in the Maldives. Although the conversation on the RAX secret phone was brief, the message was clear: "There was an SOS message from the Maldives following a crisis involving 100–200 Sri Lankan terrorists. While the NSG were being hustled, could the army help?" Sen wondered if the general could suggest military options to respond to the SOS call. Gen Sharma assured him of the army's capability and readiness to take on any assigned task within a few hours. Sen conjectured that there could be a need to airlift troops in the Gajraj.[14] A soldier to the core, Gen Sharma intervened, "It is early to

11. 7 RCR was the official residence of the Indian PM.
12. Vincent George was the personal secretary of the PM.
13. Please refer to n. 9.
14. In the mid-Eighties, there was a move by the IAF to give Indian names to all the aircraft in its inventory. The IL-76 was christened *Gajraj* meaning the "*Elephant King*". True to the epithet, the strategic airlifter could airlift 40 tonnes of cargo.

decide which aircraft to use since the task is yet to be defined. Those details will become clear as we move ahead." Sen gave credence to the experienced soldier's military acumen and left the operational planning to him.[15] He requested him to brief the prime minister in the Ops Room on his arrival at 1100h.

Nudged, the Air Force Waggles its Wings

Gen VN Sharma evaluated his options. He knew only too well that to undertake any military action in the Maldives, it would be important to position the troops expeditiously on those islands. Without a second thought, he called Air Mshl NC Suri, the VCAS.[16] That they had worn the same *school tie*[17] was a valid licence in the general's possession to *demand* anything of his friend without inhibition. That apart, the two had profound respect for each other's professionalism. Considering it inappropriate to discuss the highly classified matter on the phone, since they were conversing on unsecure lines, he requested the VCAS to go over to his office so that they could work out a plan of action, which could be presented to the PM on his return. He did tell him that a major airlift requirement was in the offing—perhaps the movement of a battalion. Next, the general called Vice Adm Gulab Hiranandani, the VCNS, and repeated the request to be in his office.[18]

Air Mshl Suri, on his part, tasked his dependable deputy, AVM Denzil Keelor—the assistant chief of Air Staff (Operations)[19]—to activate the transport aircraft fleet of the IAF. Meanwhile, Sahdev also apprised Keelor of the situation and suggested the possibility of military intervention. His parting words echoed in Keelor's mind: "You may have to move troops."[20] As Keelor

15. Please refer to n. 9.
16. As said earlier, the Chief of the Air Staff, ACM OP Mehra was abroad.
17. Both were Rimcolians.
18. As said earlier, the Chief of the Naval Staff, Adm JG Nadkarni was abroad.
19. AVM Denzil Keelor has been credited with the shooting down of a Pakistani Sabre aircraft in a dogfight over Sialkot in the Indo-Pak War (1965).
20. Interview with Air Mshl Denzil Keelor.

began organising resources, he received a call from the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) seeking airlift for 700 troops of the National Security Guard (NSG). This was perhaps the result of someone in the Home Ministry pre-empting the need of a clandestine raid to rescue Gayoom. Keelor assured the R&AW that the aircraft would be at Palam instantly; they could start loading in an hour.

As always, Gp Capt Ashok K Goel, the joint director of operations (transport) had settled in his office with the aircraft state of the transport fleet well before work started in Vayu Bhawan[21]. He had, on his fingertips, the availability of transport aircraft all over the air force. So when the VCAS enquired, he was ready with the information: five IL-76 and fourteen AN-32 aircraft were available in Agra. Another sixteen AN-32 aircraft could be mustered from Jorhat in five hours. On the vice chief's directions, he alerted all the transport aircraft bases to be prepared for a major airlift at short notice.

Airlift into hostile environment necessitates security of the airlift platforms. The *rice bombing* of Jaffna (Operation Poomalai, Sri Lanka, 1987) was fresh in Keelor's mind. On that occasion, combat ready Mirage fighters had escorted the AN-32 aircraft formation that dropped supplies for the civilian population of Jaffna. This situation was identical in its need for security cover by fighter escorts. Keelor alerted the Battle Axes, the Mirage 2000 Squadron in Gwalior, to gear up to escort the IL-76 formation to the Maldives. They were directed to position four aircraft at Trivandrum.

The General Strategises

Gen VN Sharma had pressing concerns to address before ordering his men to assault and annihilate the rebels, and rescue the president. It was important to know the adversary: his capabilities and strengths. That would determine the choice of the force and its arming. It was

21. Vayu Bhawan houses the different directorates and offices of Air Headquarters.

not possible to visualise the situation on the ground on the basis of dribs and drabs of information trickling in from sources whose reliability was suspect. The safety of Hulule airport was also a big concern because that would determine the safe induction of the troops for offensive action. It was important to know who was in control of the airfield including the Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower at any given time. The airfield being in the hands of the rebels could spell doom for the Indian aircraft landing there. The reports that had come until then suggested that the rebels had not taken control of the airfield. If the rebels intended to occupy the airport—which in all probability they would—they would need boats to ferry them across the thin isthmus between Malé and Hulule.

Gen Sharma asked Sen to urge his counterpart in the Maldives to secure the boats by sending them away from Malé, preferably to Hulule. This would serve two tactical purposes: first, the removal of the boats would deny the rebels their use, thereby eroding their capacity to cross the water obstacle and take control of the airfield. Second, and equally important, it would provide means to the Indian troops to cross the same water obstacle and reach Malé. Sen relayed the concern to Zaki. He advised him to move away as many *dhonis*[22] as possible from Malé to Hulule. He impressed upon Zaki that it was with a view to improve the prospect of the mobility of Indian troops at the cost of the rebels'.

A Parallel Effort

As the news spread, urgency pervaded the atmosphere in Delhi. It was but natural that everyone took all possible steps to address the contingencies they visualised. Someone in the Home Ministry considered a clandestine surgical strike by the National Security Guard (NSG) to be an appropriate action to counter the rebels in the Maldives and that it would be advantageous to position the elite force closest to the scene of action. Such preparedness would ensure

22. *Dhonis* were the typical boats used for ferrying people and small cargo in the archipelago.

mobilisation in the least time if a decision were to be taken later to launch them. The NSG was directed to move to Trivandrum and await further instructions. Although it is not clear who launched the force, the personnel displayed a fair level of preparedness and quick response by reporting at the Delhi airport instantly. There was some hold up due to miscommunication—it appears that they could not avail of the airlift provided by the air force. It is unclear whether finally they used a chartered Boeing of Indian Airlines or some aircraft of the Aviation Research Centre (ARC) to proceed. Notwithstanding the little confusion, they were airlifted and positioned at Nagpur well before the paratroopers took off from Agra.[23] Later in the day, they were airlifted to Trivandrum.

Meanwhile, the task had been entrusted to the army/air force and the efforts gained momentum. Due to the urgency, people forgot about the NSG personnel, who—unmindful of the developments in Delhi—had reached Trivandrum. Unsurprisingly, hardly anyone knew the reason for their coming to Trivandrum. For want of clear directions, they remained literally rudderless and without adequate logistics support until they were asked to return to Delhi later.

A Hiccup

On the way to his office, Gen Sharma met Lt Gen SF Rodrigues, the VCOAS. He too was in a hurry, on his way to meet Mr BG Deshmukh, the Cabinet secretary to discuss the same crisis. The general stopped his deputy in his tracks and asked him to sound the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) to get the relevant maps and start planning for possible contingencies. He also directed him to alert the PARA Brigade before going to the Cabinet secretary. He wanted the vice chief to order the PARA Brigade to be ready to move at a 2-hour notice.

Lt Gen Rodrigues' first attempt to alert the PARA Brigade was in vain—the telephone lines to Agra were down. Precious time

23. Interview with Air Mshl AK Goel.

was lost due to following a circuitous telephonic route through the Corps HQ (Signals Formation) at Mathura. Meanwhile, the Military Operations (MO) Directorate fore-warned the PARA Brigade of an impending operational requirement without spelling out the details. A while later, when he did get through to Agra, the PARA Brigade commander was not around and could not be spoken to directly. Maj Vinod Bhatia, the brigade major came on the line. The *first-ever-adm-inspection* of the brigade by a higher formation was uppermost in his mind at that moment. This was indeed a rare occasion when the vice chief was speaking directly to a brigade major on an official matter (read "operational").[24] Lt Gen Bhatia now recalls: "When the telephone operator told me that the VCOAS was on the line, I did not believe him because the vice chief calling a brigade major was not the *norm*. I thought it was the office of the VCOAS, meaning his staff officer wanting to speak to me.[25] I was taken aback when I found the vice chief himself on the line—I literally stood on the chair."

Lt Gen Rodrigues was in an extreme hurry. He ordered the brigade to be prepared to move by 1200–1230h. The brigade major was told that they would be airlifted to an island. They were to expect the adversary to be well armed: small arms, rocket launchers and possibly Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) too.

The brigade major, aware of the manning of the brigade on that day, foresaw the ominous consequences of not briefing the general officer *then and there,* on the available strength of the three battalions. It was vitally important to arm the seniors with facts for their calculations. He did not want the operation to end in a debacle due to avoidable miscalculations.

24. So far as it is possible, protocol demands that a senior officer from a higher formation (AHQ, in this case) speaks and issues instructions directly to the formation commander (brigade commander, in this case). Adherence to the norm ensures a free and frank two-way communication.
25. Staff officers calling the brigade major for small favours like providing a *Denison Smock* was not uncommon in those days.

Lt Gen Rodrigues was displeased when Bhatia apprised him of the ground situation in Agra: 7 PARA in exercise location; two companies of 6 PARA guarding the COD and one company of 3 PARA guarding the Command House in Lucknow, besides, some officers and troops being on leave. He conveyed that a battalion *intact* was not available instantly; but it would be possible to make up the strength by pooling in numbers in a while. By implication, the vice chief could look into the likely delay. Unimpressed (read "displeased"), the vice chief put down the phone. The inability to find a battalion ready to move was unsettling. At a higher level and in a different forum, it might reflect poorly on the preparedness of the Indian Army.

A fuming vice chief updated the COAS with the *not-so-encouraging* input from the brigade. He said that the brigade major was not accepting the '*two-hour*' notice as the brigade was in a peace station. The troops were on various outstation duties and leave; they must have three days' notice to muster a battalion before they could be given a '*two-hour*' notice. The general grasped the essence of the communication and told his deputy that he would take that on.[26]

The general now had one more serious issue at hand to deal with.

Manoeuvring Around Hurdles

Gen VN Sharma was not one to be bogged down by hurdles. As he prepared to leave for the meeting with the PM, he asked Lt Gen VK Singh, the DGMO to communicate with the PARA Brigade on his behalf and tell them that the AHQ was well aware of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the laid down norm of giving preparation time of three days. But this was a crisis situation; it wasn't possible to wait for three days—in three days, the operation would fail. He wanted the DGMO to prevail on Brig Bulsara who

26. Gen VN Sharma, "Operation Cactus: Indian Intervention in Maldives," *USI Journal*, October–December 2016, p. 470.

was his (Gen VN Sharma's) buddy,[27] and prod him to do anything to raise a conglomeration—a battalion or half a battalion—at the earliest. The general told the DGMO to ask the brigade major to send a personal message from him (the COAS) to the brigade commander to request some "bending" of standard procedures to meet the urgent operational requirement. The DGMO relayed the general's orders wrapped in words that sounded like a request to the brigade commander. The general's tact worked—the brigade got down to mustering men for the first wave with even greater verve.

In another telephonic conversation with the Military Operations Directorate (MO Dte), the brigade commander urged that he be exempted from attending the conference in Delhi.[28] It was his contention that his absence of about five hours—devoted to the to and fro travel between Agra and Delhi for the conference—would affect the preparations adversely at a crucial time. This was agreed to.

The Conference: The Big Decision

Practically everyone who mattered, or could have mattered in the scheme of things, congregated in the Ops Room in South Block by 1100h.[29] In small groups, they discussed possibilities and options as they awaited the prime minister. Although only sketchy information was available about the conditions prevailing in the Maldives, a picture was painted using the inputs received until then:

> The intruders, determined and dangerous, had come around 0430 hrs. Their actual strength was not known. It was estimated to be anything between 100–200 to 800–1000, or even more. They were armed with small arms, General Purpose Machine Guns (GPMGs), grenades, rocket launchers, mortars and perhaps,

27. As a lieutenant colonel commanding the 4th Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, Brig Bulsara had served under Gen VN Sharma in Sikkim.
28. He had received instructions earlier, to report to AHQ for briefing.
29. Please refer Leaflet 5: "The Who's Who at the Conference in Ops Room."

> Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs). Many people had been killed in the indiscriminate shooting. The capital, Malé was in the control of the rebels and mercenaries. President Gayoom had escaped and had gone into hiding; he was in a 'safe house'. The personnel of the National Security Service (NSS)[30] were putting up a fight. The rebels had breached the wall of the NSS HQ but had failed to gain access into the premises. The complex was under siege by the rebels. The rebels had a grip on the power grid. Telephone communication maintained by a private (British) company was functional on standby power. The people, at least some of them, were still connected among themselves and with the world outside albeit through circuitous routes. Hulule International Airport was still functional in the hands of men loyal to the President.

The MO Dte did not have the usual survey maps of the area of interest. So Brig VP Malik obtained naval charts courtesy the VCNS. He displayed those charts, a town map of Malé and some tourist photographs on the map board.[31] The prime minister arrived, accompanied by Sen and Sahdev.

He entered with an air of urgency and wanted to be updated on the situation. As the discussion proceeded, he tried to gauge the collective prudence of committing forces to assist a neighbour in distress. Ronen Sen briefed the congregation on the situation in the Maldives.[32] AK Banerjee, the HC (Malé) spoke of the strategic importance of the Maldives and iterated that there was reason for India to provide assistance.[33]

It was indeed a delicate situation. Although in hiding, Gayoom was still in power—a military intervention at his behest

30. The National Security Service (NSS) was a combination of the conventional *police* and the *military* in the Maldives. Until the coup in November 1988, it was considered adequate to meet threats, both internal and external.
31. Gen VP Malik, *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy: An Inside View of Decision Making* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 58.
32. Please refer to n. 9.
33. Please refer to n. 3.

would be normal. It would stand scrutiny under international law and would be absolutely tenable. But, what if, before the Indian troops reached the islands, the rebels succeeded, and there was a change of guard? What if Gayoom were to be captured and a new government led by Luthufee were to take charge before the arrival of the Indian troops? The landing of the Indian troops would then be deemed unwarranted. It would be an act of aggression. Serious thought was given to these aspects of providing military assistance to a foreign government. On the basis of the collective wisdom of those present, the PM concluded that there was a case for providing succour to the besieged neighbour.

As an aside, the PM expressed annoyance on an issue involving the NSG. Was he displeased that the NSG had been launched? Or, was he upset with their slow movement? Very few present in the Ops Room knew the real cause of the annoyance of an otherwise calm and quiet leader. Regardless of the fact that the NSG were already on their way to Trivandrum, a question was raised: should the army or the NSG take on the task? It was well understood that India was extending assistance at the behest of the Maldivian president; there was nothing clandestine about the intervention. Gen VN Sharma, Ronen Sen, AK Banerjee and most others felt that under the circumstances, sending the army would be the best bet. The voices in support of the NSG were weak whimpers that drowned in the "*Ayes!*" favouring the deployment of the army.

The idea of sending troops by the Indian Navy's frigates was given the go-by when the VCNS said that they would take 36 hours to reach Malé. Gen VN Sharma told the PM that the first option would be to airland the troops. They would be paradropped if the rebels gained control of the island. For airlanding the troops, the airfield information—about the runway and navigational aids, etc—was not readily available.[34]

34. As stated earlier, Indians had assisted in making of the runway and some of the associated infrastructure on Hulule airfield.

Rajiv Gandhi, himself a pilot, asked Sen to contact the Indian Airlines pilots—who were operating regularly between some Indian airports and Hulule—for information.

Rajiv Gandhi was apprised of the action taken to secure the *dhonis*.[35] The VCAS and VCOAS informed the PM that the Agra-based PARA Brigade and 44 Squadron had been alerted. He was told that the flying time from Agra to Hulule would be four hours. The IL-76 aircraft would be able to go across to Hulule in one hop—without the need to refuel en route. The AN-32 aircraft if used, would require a refuelling halt en route and that would delay the task force. Airlanding would finally depend on the security of the airfield.

Two open spaces were considered for the paradrop on the island of Malé. One was a coral reef, which had an open stretch of reclaimed land measuring 175m x 100m with a large boat construction shed (60m x 60m) right in the middle. The other was a football ground (120m x 100m) located in the middle of the city and surrounded by tall buildings. The island of Hulule was much larger than the stretch of reclaimed land and the football field, in area. But it was surrounded by the sea on all sides. Besides, boats would be required to ferry troops (to Malé) if they landed on Hulule.

Until then, people discussing the airlanding and paradrop options were not qualified paratroopers. They knew very little about paradropping, and nothing about jumping with the D-5 parachute from the IL-76 aircraft. To get a professional opinion on the possibility of a paradrop, Brig VP Malik got Brig Vivek Sapatnekar to the Ops Room. A paratrooper himself, Sapatnekar was the ex-brigade commander of 50 (I) PARA Brigade, now posted in the MO Dte. He looked at whatever was available in the name of a map (naval charts and a tourist map) and opined that there wasn't enough space to carry out a tactical paradrop of even 30 men either on the runway or anywhere around it. High winds were expected on the airfield due to its proximity to the sea, which would carry away the paratroopers into the sea. With

35. *Dhonis* were the speedboats used by the locals and the tourists in the Maldives.

the battle load that the troops would be carrying, they would have no chance of survival at all. To offset the effect of strong tropical winds on the parachutes, the aircraft would have to fly way off the runway, over the sea. Since there were no reference points on the vast stretch of water, it would be difficult to achieve accuracy, even in the day-time. In the night, a paradrop would be disastrous.[36] As per Brig Sapatnekar, the best option was a '*coup de main* landing' on the runway.[37]

In terms of numbers, Gen VN Sharma told the PM that in an extreme case, as many as a thousand paratroopers could land in the water. He was ready to take the military risk; he was fine with just one company landing on the airfield. Rajiv Gandhi staggered at the likely casualty figure. He hesitated because the political fallout of a military debacle on the heels of the setbacks in Sri Lanka would be disastrous for the government.

The PM considered the stakes and the worst-case scenario. He weighed and considered the cost the country might have to pay for a step forward to becoming a regional power. The confidence displayed by the military leadership nudged him to take the decision in favour of launching the operation. He gave a "go ahead!" and enquired when the aircraft would leave Agra. Gen Sharma assured him that it would be possible for the first wave to get airborne by 1400h.

The final decision was that 44 Squadron would make an attempt to airland the paratroopers at Hulule at the earliest. In case airlanding the troops was not possible, the aircraft would return to Trivandrum with the troops still on board. The next morning, AN-32 aircraft would attempt to paradrop a Company Group (Coy Gp)[38] to secure the airfield or the football stadium. The remaining battalion would be airlanded.[39]

36. For more information on the nuances of paradrop accuracy, see Leaflet 5.
37. Brig (Retd.) Vivek Sapatnekar, *Address C/O 56 APO: Location Unknown* (Copyright © Vivek Sapatnekar, 2008), p. 164.
38. A Coy Gp entails paradrop of about 120–140 paratroopers.
39. Malik, n. 31, p. 62.

During the discussion, a call from Mr John Gunther Dean, the US ambassador (in Delhi) to Mr KPS Menon, the foreign secretary, provided an interlude: he enquired about what India was planning to do to help the Maldives. He also conveyed the American willingness to provide assistance, if India so desired. He added that the US ships would take 48–72 hours to reach Malé from their nearest location.[40]

The conference got over at 1300h.

Pigeons to Agra

There was no time for the luxury of issuing exhaustive orders in black and white. It was, therefore, decided to route Brig Malik and Gp Capt Goel both of whom were present for parts of the conference, to convey the decisions and the orders to the PARA Brigade and 44 Squadron in Agra. The VCOAS further directed Brig Malik to accompany the task force up to Hulule (after briefing in Agra) and be available with them for liaison with Delhi. The two officers were given detailed instructions by their respective vice chiefs and were told that, if required, more directions would be given to them in flight through the ATC in Trivandrum. Before they left, Maj Ajay Kumar was also detailed to join Brig Malik. The team carried photocopies of the naval charts and the tourist photographs to be used for the briefing in Agra.[41]

An Unsuspecting HC is Hauled up on the Bandwagon

That day in the Ops Room, Mr AK Banerjee was the most knowledgeable person about (literally) *anything* on the Maldives. After the conference, Maj Gen Raghavan felt that the army could glean more information about the islands and the people from him. He took Banerjee aside, to the foreign secretary, and requested him to allow Banerjee to accompany Brig Malik and provide him with more information as might be necessary. Banerjee told KPS

40. Ibid., p. 61.
41. Ibid., p. 63.

Menon that he had briefed everything about the Maldives; there was hardly anything left to be said. Polite coercion made the HC shed his inhibition and join Malik.

Banerjee was surprised when Brig Malik urged him to get into the army vehicle with him and brief him as they drove. Appreciating the criticality of time, Banerjee got into the vehicle. He answered the officer's queries as they drove along. The HC thought that he would be relieved in Delhi Cantt. He couldn't have been more wrong; the vehicle stopped by an AN-32 parked on the tarmac of the Delhi Airport. Before he realised what was going on, the HC had acceded to the request of Brig Malik to accompany him further to Agra, to brief Brig Bulsara and the others.

The HC was oblivious of an even bigger demand that awaited him in Agra.

Delhi Waits with Bated Breath

After the army-air force team accompanied by the Indian HC took off for Agra, there was practically nothing left for Team Delhi to do except monitor the calls from Malé and continue updating Agra with meaningful inputs. The frenetic pace of activity and excitement that had marked the forenoon session in the Ops Room soon subsided. Gen Sharma knew that it was the lull preceding a period of hyper activity. He foresaw the stormy evening ahead. It was going to be a busy day followed by an even more busy, sleepless night.

> *A good soldier does not stand when he can sit; he does not sit when he can lie down; and he does not lie down, when he can sleep.*
>
> — A Crew Room Quote

Gen VN Sharma decided to use the brief hiatus to have a meal and take a nap to reinvigorate himself. He was, however, presented with another problem when he reached home for lunch. The VCOAS informed that Brig Bulsara wanted to carry six artillery guns to the Maldives to cater for contingencies.

Preparation and loading of the 75/24 pack howitzers would delay the take-off considerably, by about six hours. The general did not want to interfere with the brigade commander's operational plan. So he directed that the brigade be allowed to take the guns. He, however, suggested that the number be limited to four—that would cause less delay. A call from the VCAS confirmed readiness of the aircraft. He added that the loading of the aircraft was yet to commence.

Gen VN Sharma had barely shut his eyes when he was woken by a phone call from the Ops Room. At about 1500h, a conscientious young major on duty in the Ops Room sounded upset—Mr TN Seshan, the defence secretary was chastising the DGMO and the other officers on staff for the delay in take-off. He wanted an explanation. Unamused, Gen Sharma ordered the major to avail of the services of the lanky guards posted at the entrance of the Ops Room to politely escort Mr Seshan out of the Ops Room.[42]

The fallout of the major's action was immediate. The defence minister came on the line, enquiring about the hold-up. He said that the PM was calling repeatedly to confirm whether the Task Force had taken off. Gen Sharma told the defence minister that an unforeseen delay had occurred. He assured him that the operation would go through even if the delay meant landing at Hulule by night. He advised the defence minister to convey the status to the PM and be at ease. Back in the office, the general asked the staff to take time for a break and some rest.

The scene of action had moved to Agra.

42. Interview with Gen VN Sharma.

6

A Cold Start

It was an absolute cold start.

— Maj Gen Harkirat Singh (Retd)

Ripple Reaches Agra

At 0715h, Gp Capt AG Bewoor[1] received orders through the Operations Room (Ops Room) to place three IL-76 aircraft on three hours standby. This was the usual air force way of saying that an airlift requirement was in the offing; the squadron was to be prepared to undertake the task. Three hours would be allowed to get airborne after being given the '*go ahead*!' signal. The locally available personnel on leave or off duty were sent for; and they assembled promptly in the unit. A few hours later, when the commanding officer and the flight commander started deciding the crew composition, everyone wanted to be in the cockpit; fly the mission and be a part of the action.[2]

The essential details of the airlift had not been communicated in the initial message. A proactive approach sent the air warriors hunting for clues. Wg Cdr RV Kumar who always toted around a small transistor radio, came up with a lead—"a coup attempt in the

1. Gp Capt AG Bewoor was the commanding officer of the IL-76 Squadron (44 Squadron AF) based at Air Force Station Kheria, Agra.
2. Interview with Gp Capt RC Agrawal.

Maldives and the likelihood of India providing assistance," was making news. Doordarshan, in its repeated telecast, re-affirmed the crisis in the island-nation and India pledging support to Gayoom. The news made people wonder if the Maldives, nearly 3,000 km away in the Indian Ocean, was the destination for the squadron. While the guesswork continued, the engineering officer and his team began readying the aircraft. Out of sheer curiosity, the aircrew started flipping the Jeppesen Charts.[3] The navigators started working on the routes to the Maldives, the waypoints and fuel requirement, etc.

IL-76 aircraft were inducted in the IAF in 44 Squadron in March 1985. Their massive capacity to airlift (40 tonnes) had earned them the epithet of *Mighty Jets*. We, the parajumpers, attributed the epithet to the size and loud noise of the aircraft. In the four years following their induction, the squadron had been flying routine couriers to Guwahati in the east and Leh in the north—it was a blessing for the troops posted in the border areas. It had undertaken airlift assignments to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In addition to the routine tasks, the squadron had airlifted surgical cabins from Pune to Leh; and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and fuel bowsers to Thoise[4], a remote Indian post in the Himalayas. In the year gone by, the squadron had been involved in the induction of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) into Sri Lanka and had been supporting its operations since then. In spite of the busy schedule due to the airlift commitments, the squadron used to undertake occasional paratrooping training sorties. It epitomised the strategic airlift capability of India.

The regular airlift commitments had enabled the squadron to refine and master its SOPs. It was performing at peak efficiency when Gp Capt AG Bewoor donned the mantle from Gp Capt AK Goel in September 1987. Working diligently, Bewoor had raised

3. Jeppesen's Charts give navigational and airport information.
4. Very close to the border with China, Thoise holds strategic importance for India.

the bar even higher. The squadron was ever ready and eager to take on new challenges. It was usual to be placed on alerts like the one on November 3, 1988; only the nagging uncertainty was painful in this instance.

Preparing an aircraft for different roles, particularly for paradrop[5] or for carrying passengers in a double-deck[6] mode requires considerable time. An aircraft modified to airlift troops in the double-deck mode cannot be used instantly for paradrop. The squadron's technicians went the whole hog getting the aircraft ready despite uncertainty about the role in which they would be utilised. At 1000h, the squadron was ready and raring to go, with three aircraft on the tarmac. At 1100h, the alert was raised to a *one-hour standby* status.[7] Anxiety began mounting as the squadron awaited firm orders and more details—of the troops/ load, the destination, the purpose.

Meanwhile in Gwalior: as per the directions of the assistant chief of the air staff (operations), 7 Squadron was getting ready to move four of its Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft to Trivandrum. They would need some of the most essential ground equipment and technicians to prepare the aircraft for undertaking operations from Trivandrum, which was not their parent air base. One IL-76 and one AN-32 aircraft proceeded from Agra to Gwalior to ferry the ground crew and equipment to Trivandrum.

Back in Agra, owing to the state of communication as it was in the 1980s, 5 km away, the PARA Brigade—that was to be at the centre of the action later that day—would get nudged into action much later. The circumstances of the day would require a young major to interact with the top brass of Army Headquarters until the brigade commander could return to office.

5. This modification requires installation of a network of cables and allied equipment to facilitate paratrooping from the aircraft.
6. This configuration enables seating the passengers in two tiers thereby increasing the capacity substantially.
7. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, "Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives," *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2014, p. 150.

Under Shelling from Delhi, a Brigade Major Holds the Fort

Maj Vinod Bhatia, the brigade major was busy preparing for that first ever Annual Inspection by a team from the Corps Headquarters—the Book Inspection was at 1100h and the Annual Inspection was on the following day.

The Brigade Commander, Brig FFC Bulsara and his deputy, Col Chakrabarty had little to contribute in the inspection, so they took that opportunity to catch up with their visits to various units. The two decided to visit the Ordnance Field Park (OFP) and the Army Air Transport Support School (AATSS). They would be away for a considerable length of time, as they would be witnessing a demonstration of some new platforms and equipment meant for paradropping. Thereafter, Brig Bulsara would visit 60 PARA Field Ambulance (Fd Amb). Maj Bhatia was holding the fort in the absence of the commander and the deputy, as also getting the books of accounts updated for the inspection.

A 3 PARA officer, Bhatia had taken charge as the brigade major of 50(I) PARA Brigade in April that year. In the seven months that he had been in the chair, he had become deft at managing tasks assigned by the Corps/ Army Headquarters (AHQ). He could manage the affairs of the Paratroopers Training School (PTS) and other IAF elements in Agra equally professionally.

A telephone call from Brig VP Malik, the Deputy Director General of Military Operations (DDGMO), AHQ, at 1000h, interrupted the brigade major. Brig Malik told Bhatia that the PARA Brigade was required to move to an island for an operation. One Company Group (Coy Gp) and one Battalion Group (Bn Gp) were to standby to move at 6 hours and 12 hours notice respectively. The brigade commander, with one staff officer was required to move to the Military Operations Directorate (MO Dte) in Delhi by the evening. The antecedent events of those days led to the inference that this was another of the numerous moves of the PARA Brigade's Reconnaissance and Order Group to Sri

Lanka for a contingency plan for Operation Pawan.[8]

A while later, another call—this time, from the VCOAS—made it clear that it was not the usual Sri Lanka requirement. The vice chief informed the brigade major about the crisis in the Maldives and ordered the brigade to be prepared to launch an airborne operation to rescue President Gayoom and to escort him to India. He wanted a Bn Gp to be ready to emplane by 1230h and the brigade (less Bn Gp) to move to the Maldives on the night of November 3/4. The enemy would be armed with small arms; there could be rocket launchers and, may be, some Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) too. The troops were to carry 1st and 2nd line ammunition.[9] Three IL-76 and ten AN-32 aircraft had been allocated for the purpose. An AN-32 aircraft was being positioned for the brigade commander to fly to Delhi for a briefing in the AHQ Ops Room.

Bhatia told the vice chief that a battalion intact was not available, but that troops from different battalions could be pooled in to build up the requisite strength. By implication, the vice chief understood that it would take some time to get a battalion ready and going. There was little chance that the troops would get airborne in time as required by the AHQ. This displeased (read "rankled") the vice chief.

Notwithstanding the not-so-pleasant and rather inconclusive transaction with the vice chief, the brigade major got down to mustering troops. He also sent some officers to compile whatever information they could about the Maldives from the travel bureaus and the hotels situated in Agra Cantt.

Maj Bhatia's efforts to communicate with the brigade commander were not successful as the commander was on the move. Bhatia anxiously awaited Bulsara's return to the Brigade Headquarters—the major had a lot on his mind that he needed to share with his commander.

8. Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, "Operation Cactus," *SALUTE*, April-May 2016 available at http://www.salute.co.in/operationcactus/ accessed on June 7, 2017.
9. Interview with Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia.

'Bull' Takes Charge

Maj Bhatia briefed Brig Bulsara on the developments of the previous hour when the latter returned to the Brigade Headquarters at about 1100h. This was followed by several telephone calls to and from Delhi in which the VCOAS/ DGMO defined the requirements. While at it, the VCOAS gave directions on how to go about executing the operation. He suggested something operationally unviable, which was not acceptable to the brigade commander. The conversation with the VCOAS ended somewhat like this:[10]

> Bulsara: "Sir, if this is to be done, this is the way we'll do it. If it is not acceptable to you, please find another man."
>
> Pressed for time and seeing sense in the brigade commander's professional argument, the VCOAS conceded, "OK! Your choice."

(Author's Note: Gen Rodrigues politely declined to give an interview and share his recollections of Operation Cactus. As such, everything ascribed to the general officer in these pages is from the recollections of others.)

As said earlier, Bulsara conveyed to the AHQ that a trip from Agra to Delhi (and back) for a briefing would cost him precious time—time that could be devoted to preparing for the operation. He suggested that he be spared the exercise of travelling to Delhi just for the briefing. The AHQ acceded to his request and decided to send an officer to brief the brigade.

Bulsara's mind was working on multiple issues as he spoke to the officers in the AHQ: first on his agenda was to task the units under him and, of course, to learn where on the earth the Maldives were!

10. Recollection of Brig RJS Dhillon who was present in the brigade commander's office when the conversation took place on the telephone.

Where on the Earth are the Maldives?!

In the absence of military maps of the region, Capt Harjinder Jonjua, the General Staff Officer-3 (GSO-3)[11] of the brigade came up with a school atlas to give the brigade commander an idea of the location of the islands. The officers who were sent by Bhatia to get information about the Maldives returned with brochures and picture postcards. The DQ, Maj Harkirat Singh had the presence of mind to bring a coffee table book on the Maldives, which his father, Lt Gen Oberoi had passed on to him. This glossy book and the naval charts, tourist maps and pictures—brought later by Team Delhi—were useful during the briefing held later in 44 Squadron.

As Bulsara gained knowledge about the Maldives, he sent for the commanding officers of the various units so that he could brief them individually; his deputy, Col Chakrabarty and the brigade major shared whatever tasks they could.

A General Recall

7 PARA Bn was away on collective training at Band Baretha in Rajasthan. Frantic messages were sent asking them to wind up the exercise and return. Meanwhile, the GSO-2 (Air), Maj RS Yadav proceeded to 44 Squadron to coordinate activities with the air force.

Maj Bhatia called the deputy commandant of the Central Ordnance Depot (COD) and requested him to release the personnel of 6 PARA who were on guard duty at the depot. The deputy commandant, concerned about the security of the depot, was reluctant to relieve the troops untill replacements reported to him. The replacements in the form of troops of 10 Guards Battalion from Babina (nearly 275 km from Agra) could reach the COD only by the next morning. Bhatia, trying to meet the timeline drawn by the VCOAS, resorted to arm-twisting. He told the deputy commandant that the troops were to report back to their battalion instantly for an operational requirement. It was imperative. "They are under orders to force their way out of the

11. Jonjua was also the brigade's intelligence officer.

COD gate and open fire, if resisted," he said.[12] The threat worked; the troops were allowed to return to their unit.

A telephone call to 6 PARA had already triggered action in the unit.

6 PARA Shifts Gear

At 1000h, Maj RJS Dhillon, the Company Commander (Coy Cdr) of Charlie Company (C Coy) of 6 PARA was in a hurry trying to complete the After Training Report of his Coy for the training cycle that had concluded three days earlier. He was in haste for a good reason—his leave was to commence the next day.

C Coy was the Duty Coy that day. It meant that the troops had the additional task of collecting the consignments arriving at the two railway stations in Agra (Cantt and Idgah). Incidentally, all of the unit's vehicles had been lined up for an inspection. As said earlier, two companies of 6 PARA were guarding COD.[13]

At about 1045h, without a preamble, Col SC Joshi, Dhillon's commanding officer, told him that there was a brigade level operation, with 6 PARA in the lead. C Coy would be the pathfinder. He directed Dhillon to issue 'Warning Orders' to the troops and be ready to move to the Brigade HQ for a briefing in about five minutes. Dhillon apprised Joshi about the manning state of his Coy: one officer, one JCO and two ORs!

Dhillon gave his requirement of stores and ordnance to Capt Bahal Chand, the Quarter Master (QM). Hesitatingly, Bahal reminded the Coy Cdr that the unit's vehicles had been lined up for inspection and urged him to let the inspection go on. Capt Chand's contention was that a postponement would increase work for the unit—it would necessitate another round of cleaning and polishing of the vehicles. He wanted to avoid *extra* work for his boys, if possible. Dhillon, whose mind was racing in several directions, emphasised the urgency thus: "Send back the 2 PARA

12. Interview with Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia.
13. Intelligence reports had suggested that there could be a terrorist attack.

Workshop people (the Inspection Team)… [Understand!] This is an O-P-E-R-A-T-I-O-N, not an exercise!" Having served with 9 PARA Special Force (SF) earlier, Chand grasped the gravity of the situation and reacted with alacrity. He sent a Dispatch Rider (DR) to round up the men from wherever they could be found.

The briefing by Brig Bulsara and Maj Bhatia to the two 6 PARA officers—Col Joshi and Maj Dhillon—was rather crisp (read "telegraphic"). The gist of it, etched indelibly in Dhillon's memory runs thus:[14]

> There has been a coup in the Maldives. Maldives is a group of islands in the Indian Ocean. About 500 mercenaries have landed there. They have taken over the capital and imposed curfew. Communications have been cut, the president's whereabouts, or whether he is dead or alive, is not known. We have to do an airborne intervention and your [Dhillon's] Coy to be the *pathfinder* for the Brigade. We should be ready for briefing by officers from the AHQ and the Air HQ who are to reach 44 Squadron. The briefing would take place in 44 Squadron Ops Room.

An airlanded operation would entail less planning and preparation as against a paradrop from the IL-76 aircraft, which would make things difficult. Among other qualifications, two important criteria for the troops to be operationally suitable for a paradrop were: first, being qualified on the type of aircraft they were to jump from and the type of parachute system they would be jumping with, and, second, it was important that they were current. Qualification and currency were significant requirements.

C Coy of 6 PARA was well off on those counts. On de-induction from Manipur to Agra after completion of the field tenure in the east, the Coy Cdr had ensured that the Coy converted on to IL-76/D-5 jumps. It was a consolation for the commanding officer. But

14. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.

then, there were other limitations: mainly of the load that each paratrooper could carry on his person. With the D-5 parachute, he could carry only small arms—a paratrooper could jump with a 9 mm Sten Machine Carbine (MC) and not the usual weapon of the Indian *jawan*, the 7.62 mm Self-Loading Rifle (SLR).[15] Dhillon found a way to circumvent the problem: he changed the configuration of his Coy, which entailed leaving behind some troops who would be airlanded later, along with their standard weapons and battle load.

All through the preparation, Dhillon made a conscious effort to maintain a desirable level of secrecy, so very essential for the success of an airborne operation. He told his men that they were being inducted into Sri Lanka. This was to pre-empt a hostile reception—due to any inadvertent leakage of information—on landing in the Maldives.

Other units were equally busy mustering men. Meanwhile, whoever got wind of *something brewing* made a beeline to his respective unit to be able to jump onto the bandwagon. Although secluded from the brigade and the units in the Cantt, AATSS too got a whiff of the impending operation.

Enthusiastic Men Home Onto the Units

Several training courses were in progress in the AATSS. Personnel were attending classes when the message reached the school. The instructors had reservations about suspending the training and letting off the trainees. Their contention was that those were serious courses; the men could not be pulled out at will. It was imperative that orders for stopping the training be obtained from the AHQ.[16] It took a little time for the commanding officer and the instructors of AATSS to be convinced about the seriousness of what was brewing in the Brigade HQ. The classes were dispersed and the trainees rushed back to their units. They boarded any

15. See leaflet 3 for nuances of doing a jump from the IL-76 aircraft.
16. As per Col Awadhesh Kumar who was then an instructor in AATSS.

transport heading in the direction of the Cantonment (Cantt) to be able to reach their units at the earliest. "I sped on a bicycle," recalls Brig GP Singh.[17]

One of the most harried officers in the brigade that day was Maj Harkirat Singh, the DQ[18] of the brigade—with limited resources, which were scattered all over, he was to achieve a logistics miracle.

A Logistics Nightmare for the DQ

Maj Harkirat Singh, the DQ, who was to manage the logistics for the mobilisation of the brigade was in the Station Headquarters (Stn HQ)—attending a Quartering Committee Meeting chaired by Brig Limaye, the Commandant (Comdt) of the Parachute Regiment Training Centre (PRTC). Minutes into the meeting, the Personal Assistant (PA) to the Comdt barged in and said that the DQ had been called back to the Brigade HQ. "There is an emergency," he said. Reluctantly, the chairman let off the officer, asking him to re-join as soon as he was free. At that point, neither knew that Harkirat would be gone for several days.

On his return to the Brigade HQ, Harkirat rushed to the deputy commander's office. Their meeting lasted five minutes precisely in which Col Chakrabarty shared whatever little he knew about the operation and the logistics requirements associated with it. In a nutshell: "There was a coup in the Maldives. A Bn Gp has to go to the Maldives." The deputy's parting shot was, "Now you are on your own."[19]

The DQ got it clear: "This was *real* mobilisation, not a paper exercise! The troops were required to go to a foreign country, not just to Bhopal or Gwalior." Two urgent issues arose for Maj Harkirat to deal with: first, to organise transports to move a battalion along with its paraphernalia—the supplies, equipment,

17. Interview with Brig GP Singh who was then a Lieutenant (3 PARA).
18. DQ is the abridged term used for Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General (DAAQMG).
19. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

arms and ammunition—to Kheria airport. And the second, arranging packed food for them.

Lining up the requisite number of mechanical transports to move the troops became a nightmare for Harkirat because that morning, as against a requirement of about 40 vehicles to move the troops to the airfield, only two were available.[20] Out of the 32 vehicles of the transport company, only 12 were on the road. Of those 12 vehicles, six were on outstation duties; four were on school run duty, plying to carry children from the unit lines to the schools in Agra Cantt. Recalling the school runs would raise alarm and compromise secrecy. Therefore, the DQ left the school runs untouched until they returned in the normal course, at 1500h. "We had to be overtly normal," says Harkirat. The Base Workshop was asked to recall all the vehicles at their disposal from wherever they were. When they raised doubts, they were told, "Ask no questions. You'll be told no lies." The Base Workshop continued to be under the impression that it was one of the routine movements. The DQ's bonds with 2 PARA Workshop and his personal equation with the officers got him eight vehicles.[21] Other units under the brigade that were not involved in the operation were asked to spare three vehicles each. Vehicles, thus, organised were just about sufficient to execute the move in two shifts. Each round trip to Kheria would take an hour and a half. It meant that the entire exercise of transporting men and material from the Cantt to the airfield would take about three hours—it would be 1400-1430h (at the earliest) by the time the movement of troops and equipment to the airfield would be complete. "I saw overloaded vehicles trying to meet the task. I saw three men riding a motorcycle. I turned a blind eye," recalls Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

20. Ibid.
21. Maj Harkirat Singh had been posted to the Base Workshop and seconded to the Brigade HQ.

411 PARA Field Engineers

Important tasks lined up for the PARA Engineers at Malé were: to facilitate movement of troops from island to island; take up defence in assigned locations; and undertake demolition and mine clearance tasks. The other likely tasks included reactivation of the airfield facilities; repairs to the runway (if required) and restoration of power/ water supply. It was anticipated that a reverse osmosis water purification plant on Malé Island (with an output of 200 gallons per hour), might need repairs to restore the water supply.

Like the Brigade HQ, the PARA Engineers were preparing for an inspection.[22] They weren't well off on the level of manning. Capt MJ Kumar was down with viral fever. Capt Praveen Sundar had just completed his probation and earned the *maroon beret* (that very day). The officer was attending a heavy drop course at AATSS; he was not a qualified paratrooper yet.[23] Effectively, on that day, Maj K Babayya, the commanding officer of the unit was the lone officer available to deal with operational matters. He was also the lone officer of 411 PARA available to undertake a parachute descent.

The Brigade HQ tasked 411 PARA to activate the Mounting Base for a scheduled take-off at 1200h. One of its field platoons was to accompany the airborne force. Babayya needed some clarifications before preparing his platoon. Since no queries were being entertained on the telephone, he met the deputy commander personally and got clarification—about the role of his unit, in particular. He learnt that a field section was to accompany a Coy Gp into an airborne assault. The remainder Bn Gp and brigade would get airborne later. 411 PARA Engineers were to collect the parachutes for the first Coy Gp. A parachute collecting party and one field section with the standard airborne load table were ordered to move to the Safety

22. As per Unit Records of 411 PARA Fd Coy (Engineers).
23. He was to yet undergo the Para Basic Course to be a full-fledged paratrooper.

Equipment Section of the Air Force Station at Kheria. Later, the requirement of parachutes for the assault wave was increased to 300.[24] Clearly, those who gave orders did not have an idea of the parachute state on that day. The projected requirements kept changing (read "refined").

The requirement of boats to ferry troops across water obstacles in the Maldives was a given. Enquiry about the holding of boats and allied equipment of the unit—Boat Assault Universal Type (BAUT)[25] and Outboard Motor (OBM)[26]—led to a shocking revelation. The company was neither authorised nor holding any BAUTs or OBMs. Three reconnaissance boats held with the company were grouped with the initial assault team to somewhat address the need of boats. AHQ ordered 1 Corps to move some equipment from Mathura.[27]

Babayya, being the only available qualified (officer) paratrooper, decided to go with the platoon and asked for Capt Praveen Sundar to be withdrawn from the training course in progress at AATSS. Babayya tasked the young captain with bringing up the rest of the field company.

Based on visualisation of the commitment, the field platoon was organised to include suitable tradesmen. A platoon was mustered for the assault wave with the strength of one JCO and 41 ORs. They carried personal weapons, mine detectors, minefield clearance accessories, explosives with accessories and equipment, reconnaissance boats (with complete accessories), first line ammunition and digging tools. In the absence of officers, the JCOs and ORs rose to the occasion and moved the task force with all their paraphernalia to the 44 Squadron tarmac in less than three hours. They positioned 65 sets of D-5/ Z-5 parachutes on the tarmac by 1430h.

24. It may be recalled that only 65 sets of D-5/ Z-5 parachutes were available for live jumps.
25. These are the simplest of boats used by the Indian Army to cross water obstacles.
26. These are detachable motors, which are fitted on to the boats for propulsion.
27. Interview with Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia.

The picture of the rebels that got painted due to lack of intelligence was that of ruthless Tamil militants armed to the teeth and raring to cause havoc. The need of artillery guns was felt to suppress such an enemy—17 Para Field Artillery Regiment was alerted to get their guns ready.

17 Parachute Field Regiment

17 PARA was recovering from the inertia of the Zojila Day[28] celebrations of the last few days. The personnel had been observing Adm Day––a day of minimal activity, a stand down from routine work. It was a well-earned break after a long week of excitement. People on essential duties were manning posts and offices. Others were dispersed all over: from the unit lines to the Military Hospital to Sadar Bazaar. The available strength in the unit lines on the morning of November 3, 1988, was just about 30 percent.[29] At 1100h, the commanding officer was in a conference at the Station Headquarters (Stn HQ) and the second-in-command was attending a Housing Board meeting. Message was received from the brigade major for the commanding officer and the second-in-command to proceed to the Brigade HQ and the regiment respectively.

The initial instructions were sketchy—to get the men going and prepare the guns to be airlifted for an airborne operation; troops to carry first line ammunition. There was no indication of the drop/ landing zone or the area of operation. It was not known where they were headed and, hence, they did not know whether they had to carry winter clothing or not. The Commanding Officer, Lt Col KKK Singh[30] met the brigade commander to glean the very basic information to get going. He was told that they were heading for the Maldives but was also asked not to divulge that information to the men back in the unit—secrecy was to be

28. 17 PARA Field Artillery Regiment celebrates the Zojila Day every year to commemorate its role in the recapture of the Zojila Pass from Pakistan in the Indo-Pak War (1948)
29. Interview with Lt Col Gurinder Singh (Cdr 51 Bty).
30. Lt Col KKK Singh was an aviator too.

maintained. He was still unclear about the number of batteries/guns to be taken. Brig Bulsara was trying to seek permission from the AHQ to carry six artillery guns, the 75/24 pack howitzers.

Lt Col KKK Singh summoned his Battery Commanders (Bty Cdrs) and briefed them about the requirements as best as he could. He told them to prepare the guns and collect the first line ammunition from the Ordnance Depot (OD), Agra Fort. He had no answers to most of their queries. He told them that doubts would be clarified at the airfield. Men on bicycles and Despatch Riders (DRs) were sent in all directions to recall personnel. A team was also sent to the OD to collect the first line ammunition. The unit *langar* (kitchen) was tasked to prepare packed food (for 48 hours) on man-pack basis. Two batteries—49 Bty and 51 Bty (with their first line ammunition)—were nominated and about 100 men of 17 PARA were involved. Since the 75/24 Pack Howitzers were in a state of readiness they did not require any preparation time.

The unit was handicapped for want of transports: four out of seven of its 3-tonne vehicles had been sent to Bharatpur and nearly 80 percent of the 1-tonne vehicles were not mobile as they were being prepared for an inspection. The three 3-tonne vehicles given by the DQ were immediately sent to the OD Fort to load up. As each battery had to bring its complete first line ammunition and no outside manpower was available, the same personnel who were detailed to participate in the operation had to load and unload the ammunition. This was a herculean task in the limited timeframe available.[31]

After the briefing in 44 Squadron, which finished at about 1630 hours, the regiment was informed that six guns, four jeeps and three batteries worth of manpower would move—the loading was to start at 1930 h. The task was still unclear but the destination was known—Malé. At a later stage, the Army Headquarters authorised airlift of four guns instead of six.[32]

31. From the recorded history of 17 PARA Fd Regt.
32. Interview with Gen VN Sharma.

17 PARA was allocated two IL-76 aircraft for their guns and ammunition; 15.5 tonnes of the first line ammunition went in with 42 personnel of 49 Bty and 25 personnel of 51 Bty. This *mixing up* had to be done since all the ammunition had not reached in time. In addition, three 75/24 guns and the second-in command's jeep were also loaded. Personnel and equipment from other units were taken on board to make use of the full capacity of the aircraft. The commanding officer, along with a part of the load, boarded Friendly Two[33] in the first wave. The major part of the unit's load (guns and ammunition) was airlifted in the second wave (past midnight).

The issue of guns was settled. Although everyone saw the risk in undertaking a paradrop, that option was kept open until the very end. There were many issues with the parachutes and paradrop.

About Parachutes and Paradrop

Only 65 D-5 parachutes were available in a packed and *ready-to-jump* state. Brig Bulsara was sceptical about the air force being able to provide the required number of parachutes in time.[34] With nearly two hundred Safety Equipment Workers (SEWs) posted in the Paratroopers Training School (PTS) and nearly the same strength in the Safety Equipment Section (SES) of 4 Wing Air Force, Gp Capt G Gururani, the Chief Engineering Officer (C Eng O), was confident that he would be able to get the remaining quantity packed in time. The issue of parachutes and paradrop has been discussed at length in the chapter titled: "Chhatri Mata ki Jai."

Parachute Jump Instructors (PJI)

The presence of PJIs on board is a must for any type of paratrooping activity happening from an IAF aircraft. Since paradrop was

33. Friendly One and Friendly Two were the call signs of the IL-76 aircraft of the first wave.
34. Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops*, (Lancer: New Delhi, 1993), p. 209.

a considered option during Operation Cactus, a team of PJIs on board was mandatory. The Paratroopers Training School (PTS) was sounded to put a team of dispatchers on stand-by for move at very short notice—one hour. At that time, I was standing by to proceed to the National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla, to lead a skydiving demonstration by the Akashganga.[35] I was dropped out of the team and was detailed to lead another team of PJIs heading south. Either it was a concern for secrecy, or people did not have the time—I was not told anything about the operation. Having spent nearly a month in Sulur earlier that year—with 10 PARA SF awaiting op instructions for a paradrop as a part of Operation Pawan, I presumed that this was another such requirement. We would perhaps be required to establish a mounting base at Sulur or Trivandrum for an airborne operation later in Sri Lanka. So—destination and mission unknown—we took our personal baggage (for a prolonged requirement of about a month) into the aircraft. We checked the serviceability of the cables and contraptions—meant for paratrooping—fitted in the aircraft and awaited further instructions.

By noon, Agra Cantt and Air Force Station Kheria both were anxiously awaiting the team from Delhi to clear their plethora of doubts.

Trinity Descends from Delhi

The trinity of Brig VP Malik, Gp Capt Ashok K Goel and Mr AK Banerjee reached Agra to brief the Task Force. They were accompanied by Maj Ajay Kumar, a staff officer from the MO Dte. They were equipped with a travel book on the Maldives, naval charts, a photo album with ten odd photos belonging to the HC and photocopies of sketches of the Malé and Hulule Islands. By about 1400h, the troops had started arriving at the dispersal opposite 44 Squadron. The brigade commander and his lieutenants were yet to come. Wanting to make the best of their time, Brig Malik and

35. The Akashganga is the IAF's skydiving demonstration team.

Gp Capt Goel climbed a jeep heading for the Brigade HQ to hold discussions with the brigade commander. As if Murphy's Law were at play, the jeep broke down on the way, leaving them stranded in the middle of nowhere.[36] It wasn't long before they were given a lift atop a gun-mounted jeep by Maj Dhillon who chanced to pass that way.[37] The three made it in time to 44 Squadron for the mass briefing.

Mass Briefing: Airlanding or Paradrop?!

The decision to *airland* or to *paradrop* the troops was implicitly left to 44 Squadron and the PARA Brigade. Due to the paucity of time, the three HQ could not issue detailed orders in writing. In fact the formal orders to undertake the operation were issued to the air force about 10 days after the operation had been undertaken successfully—the bureaucracy could not impede the execution in any big way.[38] Of course, the absence of written orders and directives did lead to some ambiguity at different levels. There was haze in the minds of people when they gathered in the Briefing Hall of 44 Squadron at 1530h and it persisted until the end.

Team Delhi displayed the *so-called maps* and charts and gave the coordinates of the airfield, which had been worked out during the discussion in Delhi earlier in the day. In his briefing, Mr AK Banerjee outlined the situation and gave the necessary details. He talked about the people and the physical characteristics of the islands. He answered the queries raised by the army representatives. The air force mostly sought information on the airfield. About the length of the runway, he said, "I do not know the length of the runway but what I do know is that Boeings land there." As the discussions progressed, the HC felt that there was something drastically wrong with the map the people were referring to. On a closer look he realised that people were discussing a runway that had an east-

36. Gen VP Malik, *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy* (NOIDA: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 64.
37. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.
38. Interview with Air Mshl Denzil Keelor.

west orientation. Apart from the airfield infrastructure, and the boat jetty, the island was uninhabited. The HC realised that the map laid out on the table in front of him was not the correct map. He exclaimed (read "screamed") that the map being used was not that of Hulule but of Gan, an airport 400 km south of Malé—a disused Royal Air Force base of the Second World War era. He explained that the orientation of the runway at Hulule was north-south. The runway on the map being referred to had a east-west orientation. The map of Gan was removed in time.[39]

Thanks to Banerjee's presence of mind, a major military *faux pas* was averted. Had it not been for this timely intervention in the planning stage, the aircrew might have looked for a runway with a different orientation.

Brig Malik started briefing next. Notwithstanding the discussion that had taken place (in Delhi) on the feasibility of a paradrop, there was a fresh discussion on whether to go in for airlanding or paradrop. Three drop zones were suggested for a paradrop: the football stadium, a reclamation area on Malé Island and the airfield at Hulule. "You will jump your company in the football stadium on the island of Malé," he said. Maj Dhillon, whose company was to spearhead the assault, tried explaining the non-feasibility of a mass paradrop either on a football stadium or on the reclamation area. But Team Delhi continued insisting that the troops be paradropped. A suggestion was made to drop a smaller number of troops from a single door. That would require several circuits over the drop zone. The suggestion did not find favour with Gp Capt Bewoor because repeated passes over the target area would '*give away the game*' and present the rebels with an opportunity to overwhelm the landing paratroopers.[40]

39. Arun Kumar Banerjee, "Maldives Revisited," *IDSA Occasional Paper*, No. 39 (New Delhi: IDSA, 2015) available at http://www.idsa.in/occasionalpapers/OP_MaldivesRevisited _ArunKumarBenerjee _060515. Accessed on October 31, 2016.
40. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, "Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives," *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2014, p. 152.

Fearing that a majority of the troops would land in difficult situations—on rooftops and in the water—Maj Dhillon tried suggesting a solution, which was somewhat feasible. That too was not acceptable to the representative of the AHQ whose final counter-argument was, "I can't allow that. That [mass paradrop] is the order of the VCOAS." When the discussion seemed to be leading nowhere, Brig Bulsara butted in, "I'll take it from here. Malik, please tell me, what is my task?"

Malik: "To locate and rescue the president and if possible, restore the government of the Maldives."

Bulsara: "If that is the task, try to airland me on Hulule."

Bulsara's Plan

As per Brig Bulsara's initial plan, a Coy Gp with Bn HQ was to *airland* at Hulule, provided the airfield was in safe hands. A truncated company of 60-65 men[41] would jump from the IL-76 aircraft, if the need arose. Another IL-76 would airlift a Coy Gp with a skeleton Tactical HQ. He [Bulsara] would decide to abort airlanding if the airfield became unsafe. In that case, a Bn Gp *airborne assault* would be launched ex-Trivandrum at first light on November 4, to capture the airfield. The rest of the brigade would be airlanded later. The initial take-off time (1200h) was rescheduled.

The plan was reviewed and refined several times before the aircraft got airborne. Finally, the brigade commander decided to airland 6 PARA Bn and 411 PARA Engineers. The subsequent plan broadly envisaged 6 PARA Bn to secure the airfield and beachhead at Malé. The High Risk Mission Team (HRMT) of 6 PARA would then try to locate and rescue the president. Another Coy of 6 PARA would hold the airfield and push out a platoon to strengthen the company holding the Malé beachhead. A company of 3 PARA would secure the jetty and the launching area; round up all the boats (*dhonis*) at the main jetty on Malé's marine drive. Capt RD Poonekar would

41. Since only 65 parachutes were available for jumps.

lead a platoon to divert the attention of the rebels. In the next phase, the rest of the brigade would build up on Hulule airfield under Col Chakrabarty and 3 PARA would reinforce 6 PARA if required. 411 (I) Parachute Field Coy would secure vital installations on the international airport and operate boats to facilitate the induction of troops into Malé. The last phase of the operation would be devoted to mopping up.

In the case of light opposition at Hulule, the troops were to be paradropped[42] under Maj RJS Dhillon, along with a team of engineers to capture the airfield and facilitate airlanding operations.

A contingency plan was thought of in case Hulule airfield were to be captured by the rebels before the arrival of the assault wave: the operation was to be aborted and the IL-76s were to land at Trivandrum. An *airborne assault* using AN-32 aircraft was then to be executed by 6 PARA with a platoon of engineers at first light on November 4, 1988—with 3 PARA in reserve. For this, PTR-M parachutes were to be flown from Agra to Trivandrum. The detailed briefing for this contingency would be done at Trivandrum.[43]

The final decision to airland the troops drew attention to the support from the Air Traffic Control (ATC) of Hulule; under the circumstance, it could not be relied upon entirely. The need was felt to include a team of controllers from Agra who could support flying activity in the Maldives.

Ensuring the Air Traffic Services at Hulule

The first safe landing at Hulule in that situation was a matter of chance depending on who controlled the airfield at the opportune moment. The presence of an air traffic controller with a team of Airfield Safety Operators (AFSO) to facilitate the landings of subsequent aircraft was a welcome proposition. Having our own

42. As per the number of parachutes available.
43. Karim, n. 34, 211.

controller on the ground in that situation of crisis would bolster the operational capability in some ways. The Senior Air Traffic Control Officer (SATCO) got into a difficult situation when he was asked to spare an officer and some AFSOs to join the contingent. It being the festive season[44] some of his staff were on leave—sparing a team, would affect local operations adversely. Nonetheless, he detailed Pilot Officer (Plt Offr) UK Gambhir and four airmen for controlling duties at Hulule.

Gambhir had been commissioned just over a year ago and, of a year's commissioned service, he had spent six months undergoing professional training in controlling duties at the Air Force Academy (AFA), Dundigul, Hyderabad. He was uncategorised and had barely nine months of *on-the-job* experience. He would be due for categorisation as an operational controller in the next cycle only. He was capable of controlling local flying when there were very few aircraft on the circuit. The Senior Air Traffic Control Officer (SATCO) felt that since there would be very few aircraft to manage in Hulule's air space, the young pilot officer would be able to handle the traffic. He was inclined to retain the more experienced and categorised controllers back in Agra where there was considerable air traffic: the daily local paratrooping sorties, flying by the local Surveillance and Reconnaissance Squadron, a few outstation aircraft in transit and Indian Airlines flights. Most importantly, experienced controllers were required to provide air traffic services to the Mirage fighters occasionally flying in from Gwalior.

Gambhir had been on duty in the night shift and was off duty that morning. He hadn't reported to the ATC and couldn't be traced anywhere on the station, including his room in the Officers' Mess. An orderly recollected that the officer had been detailed to pick up presents and sweets for children from Sadar Bazaar for the Deepawali celebrations to be held in the mess in the following week.

44. Deepawali was round the corner.

There was no way to send an instant message and ask Gambhir to return to the tower. Someone in the office had the presence of mind to call the Police Station in Sadar Bazaar area and request the staff on duty to locate Gambhir in the market and ask him to return to Kheria instantly. The make, colour and registration number of Gambhir's scooter were given to the cops to enable them to identify the officer.

The ingenuity bore instant result—a traffic constable spotted the scooter, and through the scooter, Gambhir, and passed on the urgent message. On return to the ATC, the pilot officer was directed to report to 44 Squadron. Doubts were raised about Gambhir's professional capabilities and competence. There was reluctance to accept an inexperienced controller—a greenhorn, who was yet to be categorised. There was a demand for a categorised and more experienced professional. Gp Capt Bewoor, who had observed the young officer on duty, intervened. He certified the professional competence of the officer. He said that though not categorised, Gambhir had good experience as a controller. He was controlling fairly heavy air traffic and was the holder of a Private Pilot's Licence (PPL). Following some ado, Gambhir, along with a team of AFSOs was ordered to join the contingent. They boarded the aircraft with a GU-734 communications set and a hundred *Goose Necks*[45] filled with kerosene—to cater to the need of communicating, and lighting the runway in case of disruption of power supply.

The lack of military maps of the islands and intelligence in the prevailing situation was a cause of concern. All through the briefing, Brig Bulsara wondered how to overcome that handicap. His mind zeroed in on Mr AK Banerjee who had answered all the queries about the Maldives during the briefing.

45. Goose Necks are large kerosene lamps made from canisters. They are used as temporary replacement for runway lights to illuminate the runway during power failures.

The HC's Tryst with Destiny

As was the case in Delhi, Mr AK Banerjee was the most knowledgeable person about the Maldives in Agra too. The manner in which he answered questions bolstered the confidence of everyone present for the briefing. That's when Brig Bulsara stumbled upon the idea of carrying this confidence further to Hulule. He requested the HC to accompany the troops to Hulule—his presence with the brigade would be a force multiplier. The suggestion struck Banerjee like a bolt from the blue. Being a part of a military operation as a civilian was unimaginable for him. "If I had known this was coming, I would have been economical with my advice," says Banerjee jocularly.[46] A feeling of patriotism knocked the fear off the diplomat's mind. He honoured the brigade commander's plea subject to two preconditions: one, formal permission was sought from the Ministry of External Affairs; and two, he was provided with a toothbrush and a shaving kit. Banerjee had left home in Delhi with nothing in hand—he was to be back home for a late lunch. Both his requirements were met—formal permission was obtained from Delhi and toiletries were arranged.[47]

In a historical first, a diplomat became an integral part of a military mission.

Refuelling—a New Challenge

The three aircraft had been readied for a haul of troops and equipment up to Trivandrum. The decision to go to Hulule *non-stop*—and return to Trivandrum, if need be—shot up the requirement of Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) in each aircraft. The total requirement of ATF rose by a whopping 66 kL![48] This triggered another flurry of activities. With the capacity of a fuel bowser being 12 to 18 kL, several to and fro shuttles would be required between 44 Squadron dispersal and the Indian Oil Corporation's

46. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee.
47. Ibid.
48. 22 kL per aircraft.

(IOC's) dispensing point located about 4 km away, to *top* up the three aircraft. Gp Capt G Gururani,[49] his technicians and the staff of the IOC worked double time to ensure uninterrupted supply of ATF and readiness of aircraft in time.

Working on a *Need-to-Know* Basis

Let alone intelligence, very little information was available. Therefore, there weren't many well-informed people. Absence of reliable information and clear directions, and the need to maintain secrecy forced people to share information on a *need-to-know* basis. Most people were unsure whether they were going to Sulur, or Trivandrum, or Sri Lanka. They also did not know whether they were getting into action immediately on landing. This affected the preparation in different ways: each one up and down the line prepared for the operation as per his own limited understanding.

So when the troops reported to the 44 Squadron tarmac, they were carrying every possible thing necessary to establish a forward base or a mounting base. They carried tents; furniture, including chopping tables for the field mess; dining tables, chairs and large containers and utensils to run full-fledged messes. The load master, concerned about the *all up weight* limitations couldn't accept the entire load. This led to an occasional altercation. Maj Harkirat had to intervene to calm tempers between the load master and the Quarter Master (QM).

The PJIs who boarded the first aircraft were under the impression that they were heading to Sulur to establish a mounting base for an *airborne operation* in Sri Lanka, which would be launched a day or two later. They had carried their aircrew bags to sustain them for a few days in Sulur.

Like Agra, Gwalior was responding to the call of duty.

49. Gp Capt G Gururani was the chief engineering officer of 4 Wing Air Force.

Battle Axes[50] Bare their Cutting Edges

It was a day like any other for the Mirage-2000 Squadron (7 Squadron AF) in Gwalior. Routine flying training was in progress. Flt Lt R Nambiar had just landed after completing his day's first combat flying training mission when orders were received from AVM Denzil Keelor, the ACAS (Operations) to position four fully armed Mirage-2000 fighter aircraft at Trivandrum for Air Defence (AD) escort duty. The Battle Axes had had a feel of AD escort role during Operation Poomalai (Sri Lanka, 1987) when they had escorted a formation of AN-32 aircraft, dropping supplies in a hostile air space over the besieged town of Jaffna. It was conjectured that this was a repeat of what had happened the previous year. But in a while, it became clear that this time on, the AD cover was to be provided to a formation of IL-76 aircraft flying towards the Maldives.

That morning, the Commanding Officer, Wg Cdr AV Vaidya was away on temporary duty in Headquarters Central Air Command, Allahabad. He was attending a briefing for Exercise Suraksha planned for a date later in the month.[51] Sqn Ldr JS Panesar, the flight commander, took charge in Vaidya's absence. He called the squadron and briefed each individual about the requirement—the preparation to fly the four aircraft to Trivandrum was under way.

After the last training sortie landed in the afternoon, six aircraft (including two standby) were *turned around*[52] and readied for the assigned task. Each aircraft had to be armed with two front guns (120 rounds/ gun); two Magic missiles and three drop tanks. The aircraft were meant to provide air defence cover to the IL-76 formation as it flew into the Maldivian air space. They were well armed to combat any aerial threat. Their front guns could engage not only aerial targets, but also destroy or, at least disable

50 Battle Axes is the name given to 7 Squadron Air Force.

51. Squadron Diary, 7 Squadron Air Force.

52. *Turn around* is the technical process involving topping up of oils, greases, air and gases and carrying out maintenance so that the aircraft is ready to take to the air for the next mission.

soft-skin targets like trucks on the ground and small vessels at sea. In the late 1980s, the Mirage 2000 was the only aircraft in the inventory of the IAF that could undertake such tasks at fairly long ranges.[53]

The AN-32 and the IL-76 aircraft from Agra reached Gwalior well in time. The AN-32 aircraft took off with the *advance party*––a team of professionals to do the necessary spadework to facilitate operational flying at Trivandrum. The IL-76 aircraft got airborne later with the ground crew and the necessary equipment to prepare the aircraft for the mission next morning. Flt Lt H Singh (Harry) a fighter pilot, accompanied two of the squadron's technical officers—Sqn Ldr R Mittal and Flt Lt JC Goyal—on board the IL-76 aircraft to support the operations at Trivandrum.[54]

At 1500h, the briefing hall of 7 Squadron was abuzz; the boards, charts and maps were ready. The entire squadron was present; the aircrew had reported with their baggage. Preliminary briefing was over when the commanding officer landed back in Gwalior at 1515h. He was in the briefing hall by 1530 with his baggage. The briefing continued on his arrival. Formations were assigned for the ferry out:

Sqn Ldr JS Panesar (Call Sign – Kirpan 1)
Sqn Ldr SS Dhanda (Call Sign - Kirpan 2)
Wg Cdr AV Vaidya (Call Sign – Battle Axe 1)
Flt Lt R Nambiar (Call Sign – Battle Axe 2)

The Kirpan formation took off at 1550h followed by the Battle Axes at 1700h. Those were single hop 2-hour ferries to Trivandrum. The sky had started turning cloudy when the Kirpans flew over Bangalore. They warned the Battle Axes to expect bad weather en route. Panesar and Dhanda landed in a drizzle at Trivandrum. The Battle Axes encountered rough weather as expected and landed well after sunset, in the rain. It turned out to be a night

53. Interview with AVM JS Panesar.
54. Squadron Diary, 7 Squadron.

ferry. They landed off the Instrument Landing System (ILS) at Trivandrum.[55]

The Southern Air Command (SAC) headquartered in Trivandrum was established in July 1984. The air force was still acquiring the assets and creating the infrastructure for the command and the units located in Trivandrum; the messes and other facilities were coming up. The air base was not fully equipped to handle an unusual influx of people. Wg Cde Nair, the Commanding Officer (CO) of 17 Forward Base Support Unit (FBSU), received the Battle Axes from Gwalior. Thereafter, the aircrew got their orders through Wg Cdr Nair. The aircrew and the technicians who landed at Trivandrum were accommodated in temporary barracks and tents on the airfield. The unannounced arrival of the NSG commandos would add to the woes of the local administration.

While the air force and the army had well defined roles, the navy's involvement could not be ruled out entirely.

The Indian Navy Gears up in Anticipation

All present at the meeting with the prime minister got cracking with their plans. The Indian Army and the Indian Air Force had very clearly defined roles—the air force was to airlift the army Task Force and position them at Hulule. The army was to rescue the president. The navy did not have a role to play until then. But since the operation had to do with action on island territories of a friendly neighbour, the War Room of the Naval Headquarters (NHQ) was activated. A stock of the situation was taken and the available ships were alerted for action.

The Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) West had directed Capt (IN) HA Gokhale, captain of the Indian Naval Ship (INS) *Betw*a, a frigate from Cochin, to bring the ship to *immediate notice for motoring*. In the naval parlance, it implied that the ship had to be readied in all respects to set sail at the earliest and

55. Interview with AVM R Nambiar (later air marshal).

undertake any operation that she was meant to prosecute. To maintain secrecy, the captain was specially told not to share the information with the crew till the ship was out of Cochin harbour. In retrospect, Gokhale reflects, "I wonder if this precaution was really necessary, because when we made the unexpected visit to Malé after the operation, my sailors had enough money for their foreign cruise shopping!"

The order for '*immediate notice for motoring*' triggered a flurry of activities—getting key personnel on board; cessation of routine maintenance and minor repairs; topping up of stocks of ammunition and water; switching *on* of the gyro and cooling perishables; ensuring availability of cypher publications and charts and serviceability of communication sets. On instructions of the NHQ, INS *Betwa* set sail from Cochin at 1620h on November 3, 1988. Squalls and a thick cloud cover had turned the sea moderately rough as the frigate set sail out of the harbour. A Chetak helicopter embarked the ship once she was out of the harbour.

INS *Godavari* was returning from Australia after a long exercise. She had anchored briefly in Port Blair for refuelling and customs formalities. The captain of the frigate, Capt (IN) Gopalachari and the crew were in a hurry to make it to Bombay in time for Deepawali, which was round the corner. INS *Tir*, a cadet training ship was returning from Mauritius/ Seychelles. Both these ships were also directed to head in the direction of the Maldives.

Agra continued to bustle with activity.

IAF's Flexibility on the Ground

Gp Capt Goel and Gp Capt Bewoor had done the external checks and were seated in their aircraft (K-2999) carrying out the checks before start-up. Brig Bulsara, Col Joshi and Maj Dhillon, who were leading the paratroopers, were seated in another aircraft (K-2878). I was on board the K-2878 with Brig Bulsara. The start-up trolleys

had been connected and the din inside the aircraft had reached a crescendo. Brig Bulsara, realising that Goel and Bewoor were in the other aircraft, asked me as to which aircraft would be in the lead. He was visibly puzzled when I gestured in the direction of the K-2999 and told him that the aircraft being piloted by the duo of Goel-Bewoor would [obviously] be leading.

That order of take-off and landing was not acceptable to the brigade commander because all officers of the army who were responsible for taking decisions and directing the operation in Hulule were in his aircraft. If the other aircraft landed first, the officers and the troops landing with it would be stuck for want of further orders. They would be rudderless for some time till the second aircraft landed. He sent me running to the other aircraft, to the duo who were, by then, deeply engrossed in the start-up procedures, to request them to change the order and put Bulsara's aircraft (K-2878) in the lead.

The brigade commander was not amused when I told him on my return that it was too late to make any changes. He sent me back to impress upon Goel and Bewoor the seriousness of the issue. This time on, the brigade major came along to stress the demand. The commanders in blue saw reason in the demand and resorted to interchange of crew between the two aircraft to accommodate the operational need.

Such action in the nick of time when all flight related documentation had been done and the pilots were half way through with their checks was absolutely unprecedented. It was done purely to meet a dire operational requirement of the army. I am yet to recall a better example of synergy and flexibility.

Friendly Formation gets Airborne

The aircraft doors were closed and the ramp was retracted as the troops settled in their seats. The flight engineer's instructions over the public address system became unintelligible in the persisting cacophony. In a while, all sounds were supressed by the roar

of the Mighty Jets. As the sun set on the smog-filled City of the Taj, Friendly One unstuck the runway at 1800h[56] and rose above the horizon; minutes later, Friendly Two took to the air. The paratroopers hailed, "*Chhatri Mata ki Jai*!" Literally meaning: "*Long live Goddess Parachute*," this battle cry of the Indian paratroopers instils profound courage in the meekest of hearts. Beset with multiple thoughts of uncertainty about the safety and security of the runway at Hulule, the Indian Task Force was on its way to respond to the neighbour's SOS call.

56. 1804h to be precise, as per the records of the Agra ATC.

7

A Take-off in Haze

In an Alien Atmosphere

The skies into which the Friendly Formation took off were friendly; but the all-pervasive uncertainty had given a hue of alienness to the atmosphere. The distance to Hulule (2,600 km) was long and the welcome, absolutely uncertain. The island of Hulule was in safe hands when the last reports came in before take-off. That status could change in minutes. It was easily possible for the rebels at Malé to get into speedboats, come to Hulule Island, and overwhelm the population of less than 30-40 people[1] on the airfield. They could then pose a danger to the Friendly Formation.

There was some consolation even in that uneasy atmosphere. As the Formation flew through the Indian air space there was no possibility of retaliation. It was expected that, even beyond the Indian shores, there would be no resistance from an airborne platform. Therefore, the need to provide fighter escort by the Battle Axes was dispensed with. No further instructions were given to the Battle Axes. The Friendly Formation was all by itself. Secrecy was still a concern.

On a Secret Mission: "*Valkyrie*!"

The ATC at Trivandrum was informed that (officially) one aircraft

1. This population included the work force managing the airfield services and the few *dhonis* (local speedboats) available on the island.

was flying from Agra to Trivandrum on a routine flight. The second aircraft, Friendly Two captained by Wg Cdr AS Gill trailed one kilometre behind Bewoor's, maintaining radio silence. It had switched off its navigational lights too. Keeping station in that state for four hours was an incredible feat. The Friendly Formation was at 37,000 ft when they passed over Trivandrum. The controller at Trivandrum was disturbed when he realised that the K-2878 was going somewhere else instead of landing. He was told the reasons and asked to maintain *silence* (read secrecy).

A code word assigned by the assistant chief of the air staff (operations), "*Valkyrie*,"[2] was received by the Formation.[3] It meant a green signal to the Formation to press on: "Hulule was [still] in safe hands!"[4] Incidentally, Operation Valkyrie was the codename given to the plot hatched to kill Hitler. The word has its origin in Norse mythology: a *valkyrie* ("chooser of the slain") is one of a host of female figures who choose those who may die in battle and those who may live.

The two aircraft did not report their position at *NOKID*—a checkpoint between Trivandrum and Malé through which all air traffic between Southeast Asia and the Middle East passes. This was done to avoid being *seen* or *heard*.

A similar arrangement had been struck with the ATC at Hulule. The controller would transmit a secret code (word) on query to indicate that the runway was safe for landing.

In-Flight Briefing

The activity in the two aircraft came to a stop when the Friendly Formation took off from Agra. A little after the aircraft levelled out at about 25,000 ft, Brig Bulsara got his officers together and began

2. Interview with Air Mshl Denzil Keelor.
3. Air Mshl Ashok K Goel, "The Facts: 3 Nov 1988 (Op Cactus from the Force commander of the operation)," April 16, 2012, available at http://airmarshalashokgoel.blogspot.in/2012/04/facts-3-nov-1988-op-cactus-from-force.html. Accessed on March 7, 2013.
4. There are different views of the protagonists on this arrangement.

briefing them. The glossy coffee table book and the photocopies of tourist maps were out again. Bulsara briefed Col Joshi (Joe), Maj Dhillon, Maj Umed and Capt Poonekar on the nitty-gritty of the operation.

An hour later, Brig Bulsara was done with the briefing. In his parting instructions, he told his officers to work out their detailed plans and brief the men in turn. When he climbed the flight deck, the aircraft was flying past Secunderabad at 34,000 ft.[5] The brigade commander settled down in a seat and dozed off—a good soldier makes use of every opportunity to recoup; to be fresh again to fight.

The officers went about briefing the Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) who, in turn, briefed the troops. They were assigned areas on the island to take up the defence. The JCOs conveyed the high commissioner's concern for cleanliness on the islands to the troops. They were told specifically how to deplane and get away from the aircraft. The troops were told to file out of the aircraft from the aft end and walk along the fuselage towards the nose until they were under the wing of the aircraft. Thereafter, they were to turn away from the fuselage and walk (under the wing on either side). They were to fan out after clearing the aircraft. This was an important part of the briefing to ensure that the small dispersal area was clear of the troops and available for parking Friendly Two. Following this simple briefing, the troops would get into a hazardous situation on deplaning.

411 PARA Engineers had important tasks to handle after landing. The field platoon was divided into several sub-teams to address various issues. The Runway Clearance Team was tasked to carry out runway repairs. The Power Supply Team was to take charge of the powerhouse complex on the airfield and ensure continued operation. The Water Supply Team was responsible for the functioning of the water supply installation. The Out Board

5. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1993), p.212.

Motor (OBM) Operators Team was tasked to man the powered boats commandeered at Hulule Island or obtained stealthily from the nearby islands. The remainder field platoon was divided into three sections under three section commanders and was tasked to take up defence north of the jetty.

The PJIs on board went about their chores while troops were being briefed.

An Unnerving Revelation!

The instructors spoke to the troops and shared occasional jokes. It was important to talk to them in-flight and boost their morale before a jump. We (the PJIs) were still under the impression that they were headed for a paradrop ex Sulur or Trivandrum in the very near future. A part of this morale boosting exercise includes enquiring about the fitness of individual jumpers and whether they are all ready (read "willing") to jump. It is a way to elicit the status of their currency when jump logs and training data are not readily available. In this case, they were also asked specifically whether they had jumped with the D-5 parachute from the IL-76 aircraft.

This interaction with the troops led to two startling revelations: First, all the troops on board the aircraft were not qualified and current on jumps with D-5 parachutes from the IL-76 aircraft. Second an even more startling discovery was that some of them had never jumped from any aircraft—they were yet to undergo the Basic Course in parachute jumping.[6]

For me as the leader of the PJIs on board the aircraft who were to despatch these troops, those revelations were very unnerving. It was, however, a relief to note that airlanding was the preferred option; paradrop would be the last resort. It was also a big relief that we had only 65 parachutes and there were more than 65 qualified jumpers. The fact that we were not going to Trivandrum or Sulur, or any other air base in India dawned on us (the PJIs) a little later.

6. In-flight feedback to me from the PJIs.

Never Before, Never Again: Distribution of Ammunition on Board

The troops had moved from the cantonment to Kheria in a great hurry, in whatever mode of transport they could get in to. Until they left the cantonment, their 1st and 2nd line ammunition had not reached from the ordnance depot/ unit armouries. Trucks laden with ammunition boxes followed the vehicles carrying the troops. There was practically no time to distribute the ammunition to individual *jawans* in the unit premises.

An effort was made to distribute the ammunition to individuals on the tarmac of 44 Squadron, but the distribution had to be stopped abruptly when emplaning began. The ammunition boxes were loosely shut in whatever state they were, and placed in the aircraft. Further distribution was postponed until after landing. After about an hour in flight, it became clear that the troops would go into action immediately on deplaning at Hulule; there would be no time to distribute the ammunition. So the distribution recommenced. The troops were handed over their quota of ammunition and grenades. As per Maj Gen Harkirat Singh, the grenades were primed[7] in the aircraft. This is not a norm; it is never done as it jeopardises flight safety. But then, under the circumstances, that was the only option.[8]

Such distribution of ammunition had never been done before—perhaps it would never be done again.

A Surprised Second-in-Command

What if Friendly One failed to make it to Hulule for any reason? What if a technical fault forced the lead aircraft to divert and land en route in India? Then either the operation would have to be abandoned or another person would have to take charge. Brig Bulsara was determined to accomplish the mission at all costs,

7. *Priming* is the process of preparing a grenade for instant use.
8. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, "Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives," *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2014, p. 154.

therefore, turning back was not an option. He nominated Lt Col KKK Singh, the senior-most army officer on board Friendly Two, to take charge in that situation.

On board Friendly Two: tired and weary after a hectic day, KKK was relaxing in his seat when he was informed that he was to take charge as the task force commander in place of Brig Bulsara, in case Friendly One failed to make it to Hulule. This came as a big surprise to the officer. "I almost fell off my seat," jokes Col KKK Singh. He got all the officers together and briefed them on actions after landing. The instructions were mainly on deplaning drills and rendezvous on the island. He could not speak much on the conduct of the operation, as he was not privy to the detailed operational plan. He could not answer the queries raised by some of them. "I felt embarrassed because I had no answers to the queries of the officers," says KKK Singh.[9]

Dinner at 30,000 Ft

Many on board both aircraft had not been able to find an opportunity to eat their lunch that day. They were hungry, and tired too. At 30,000 ft somewhere over Nagpur, they relished their well-earned meal. They were expected to sustain on whatever they were partaking now. The next meal was not in sight.

Two Men and a New Found Purpose

Almost three hours into the mission, landing had firmed up as the first option, subject to getting an *OK* from the ATC at Hulule. What if the landing of Friendly One led to an offensive reaction by the rebels? What if they rushed from Malé in speedboats and tried countering the Indian troops who would still be in the process of getting control of the airfield—and a fight broke out? What if the ensuing exchange of fire prevented the landing of Friendly Two and the subsequent aircraft? A paradrop would be an alternative to landing the aircraft in a hostile environment; and, in that case,

9. Interview with Col KKK Singh.

having someone who could control a paradrop by guiding the pilots based on the actual winds on the island would be a big boon. The presence of a professional would lessen the possibility of the paratroopers drifting into the sea.

Gp Capt Goel asked me to deplane with the troops and do just that—study the actual wind pattern on the airfield and provide guidance to the pilots and aircrew to paradrop the troops accurately. I was still unclear of the bigger plans and the scheme of things. I got my team of PJIs together and briefed them of the requirement to prepare and man the drop zone (the Hulule airfield) for a possible paradrop. I told them that one of them needed to join me. As I had expected, everyone's hands went up; they started vying to join me. All of them were proficient in laying out a drop zone. For me, to be able to choose one was difficult. So I nominated Warrant Officer (WO) Karam Singh to join me. He was the oldest of the lot, and the most experienced.

Our *raison d'être* on the island was going to be: to facilitate a paradrop, if the need arose. So I decided that I would go to the ATC tower on landing. That would give me a bird's eye view of the island. I took out the bare minimum of things that I would need from my aircrew bag—my shaving kit, toothbrush, hand towel and some currency notes—and handed over the bag to one of my team members to take back to Agra. The two of us now waited anxiously to deplane with the rest of the troops.

The Landing.

If there was one thing that had caused enormous (read maximum) anxiety all through the planning and execution of Operation Cactus, it was the *L-A-N-D-I-N-G*. All through the flight, the aircrew ruminated over the small bits and crumbs of information and intelligence whose veracity was difficult to accept. Their minds oscilated between finding the runway safe to land and being fired upon on touchdown. Regardless, Friendly One tore through the darkness.

Switching over from instruments to flying visually, relative to an unknown (invisible too) runway and landing in total darkness after a long fatiguing flight of four hours, and an exhausting day, requires very special abilities on the part of the pilots. Under such circumstances, many an experienced pilot has got disorientated and has ended up in a difficult situation. Bewoor and Goel were conditioned to face such challenges; for them, the mission always came first. Thirty minutes to go: the time for speculation was fast getting over; the options were coagulating. The pilots, the high commissioner, the paratroopers and the parachute jump instructors waited with bated breath. Each of the last fifteen minutes before touchdown felt like a lifetime.

It was a nerve-wracking period for the controllers manning the control tower at Hulule too. At one moment, they scanned the jetty and the airfield, shrouded in darkness, for suspicious movements and at the next, they tried to pierce the darkness of the northern sky, eagerly looking for the Friendly Formation.

Friendly One descended to 20,000 ft with Friendly Two in tow, and established the first radio contact with Hulule at 2125h with: "This is Friendly One."

"Go ahead!" responded Hulule control tower excitedly.

"Do you have a message for me?" Bewoor was anxious.

The Maldivian controller responded to Friendly One's transmission with: "*Hudia*! *Hudia*! *Hudia*!" That call conveyed the most relieving message of the tense hours gone by. It meant: "The runway is safe to land!" It was a moment to celebrate. But the elation of getting that favourable response lasted nanoseconds. Cold fear replaced jubilation. "Could the controller be responding under duress—with a gun placed on his temple?" Could it be a ruse, a trap? Were we being trapped into a difficult situation?" The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) and other terrorist groups based in Sri Lanka were notorious for luring their opponents into death traps. Questions without answers gnawed at the courage of the brigade commander. Bulsara knew there were no straight

answers to those menacing questions. He had very little time to decide—it was now or never.

He preferred the harder choice—he advised Bewoor to land.

Once again, the cargo hold of the aircraft became a beehive of activity—last minute instructions criss-crossed the space between people, mostly through gestures, as voice communication was not a possibility. The activity subsided as fast as it had started. It was time to land; the troops sat back and braced for the usual landing *thud*.

Wg Cdr MK Singh, the navigator, had got the aircraft this far, using the onboard navigational aids and instruments. It was like flying blindfolded. Until then, the runway lights had been kept "off" to avoid drawing the attention of the rebels who were causing havoc on Malé Island. The next few minutes were going to be the time of reckoning for the trio of Bewoor, Goel and MK Singh. It was going to be a difficult approach and landing, without runway lights, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, close to the Equator, with strong crosswinds. By now, Friendly Two had separated and was orbiting at 3,000 ft.

Still closer to the ground, the ground mapping radar of Friendly One was picking up a large echo because of the shallow coral. Further progress would require some visual indications. In another transmission to the ATC from about 25 km, the crew asked for the runway lights to be switched *ON*. The lights came *ON*, but went off in ten seconds. That *blink* of the runway lights gave the crew a reference to align with. Friendly One continued tearing through the darkness, unguided; descending all the time towards the unlit runway, without visual references.

In those extreme conditions, executing a prefect landing was a though task—a *safe*, incident-free landing was what everyone was looking forward to, and it had to be done in the first attempt. Going round and coming again (for a perfect landing) would raise an alarm and activate the rebels and expose the Task Force to avoidable retaliation. The aircrew

needed a different set of eyes and ears and a unique set of reflexes beyond the sixth sense for alertness against surprise gunfire or an intimidating flashlight.

In the dark night, the water around the island gave the impression of emptiness. There were no city lights, which provide some reference on the ground at most airports. Wide open eyes looked out for references; there was absolute silence in the cockpit except for the occasional intercommunication among the aircrew. "*Lights*!" was the last transmission from Bewoor to the ATC when the aircraft was about 200 m above the sea. The lights came *ON* again. Bewoor flared the aircraft as the runway lights came *ON*. He pulled back the throttle and chopped power. No sooner did the wheels touch the concrete, the controller switched off the runway lights. Although he did it to keep off the rebels' attention, it posed a problem for the pilots.

It wasn't possible to judge exactly where on the runway the aircraft had touched down. Overshooting the end of the runway would consign the nearly 150 men on board the aircraft to a watery grave; so close was the runway to the sea that the waves washed the dumbbells at high tide. Bewoor engaged reverse thrust on all four engines, and sat on the brakes to shorten the landing run. Friendly One came to a halt at the end of the runway with barely three concrete slabs to spare. The crew heaved a sigh of relief; so did everyone else on board. Yet again, the troops had trusted their lives to the skills of the aircrew who indeed were among the most thoroughbred professionals in the world.

The aircraft turned about at the end of the runway and proceeded to the passenger terminal. The crew fought back the fatigue that creeps in due to long hours of sitting in the cockpit seat. In the darkness outside, they saw the light from the mosque on Malé Island.

The ramp was lowered as Friendly One reached the parking area. The two in-board engines were shut off. The troops quickly

filed out; they supressed the urge to shout, "*Chhatri Mata ki Jai.*" The battle cry was deferred to an opportune moment later in the day. They walked along the fuselage on either side and on reaching the wings, turned outwards and rushed away from the aircraft.

The primary concern on reaching the Maldives was to find President Gayoom but the immediate concern was to take control of the airfield and the ATC tower. The troops who fanned out on the port side came to a dead end at the terminal building that housed the passenger lounge and the ATC. Draped in darkness, the complex appeared deserted and ghostly.

A team led by Maj Dhillon moved stealthily towards the terminal building. Karam Singh and I followed them. The troops on the starboard side, strode on until…

Horror Awaits Friendly Two

Friendly Two approached the runway in a procedural ditto. Horror struck Wg Cdr AS Gill, the captain of the aircraft, when—very close to touching down—he saw troops crossing the runway. There was no scope of going around; he was committed to land, and in the process, likely to mow down some of those troops in front of him. His heart missed a beat as he narrowly missed the last man. These were the men who had walked out of Friendly One and had fanned out on the starboard side. Since they did not encounter any building, they had continued to march past the tarmac, past the taxi track and on to the runway.

Offloading

The troops took very little time to deplane. They did not offload all their equipment and bulk ammunition. Leaving behind a large number of boxes and containers, they stumbled out of the aircraft with their weapons and haversacks; radio sets and engineering equipment. Some of the boxes that were left behind were lying open, with items of equipment and ammunition spilling out. After

the troops left, there was no one to take care of the containers or offload them from the aircraft.

The parachute jump instructors whose job was to despatch the paratroopers in case there was a paradrop, had been jobless during the flight from Agra to Hulule[10]—they continued to be without work except for helping the troops to deplane. They rose to the occasion and responded to the call of duty. They formed a chain, offloaded all the boxes and containers on a *war-footing* and stacked them neatly on the tarmac. The metal containers gave out sparks as they rubbed/ collided with each other.[11]

The crew of Friendly Two were less tense as the runway was *safe* for sure and the runway lights, were available for the asking. The landing was smooth.

Meanwhile in Agra/ Trivandrum

The AN-32 aircraft were lined up on the tarmac opposite the Paratroopers Training School (PTS) and No 12 Squadron Air Force before the Friendly Formation got airborne. Elements of 3 PARA and other units also reached Kheria. Part of the entitled ammunition was issued to the troops on the tarmac. They then moved to the nearest aircraft, loaded and settled down, as per convenience, because in the time available, it had not been possible to organise emplaning and seating as per a plan. Some parachutes were stacked in rows on the floor in the aisles. Some less essential stores and equipment were offloaded at the behest of the aircrew and the load masters.

The subsequent waves took off much after last light. The AN-32 aircraft landed at Tambaram for a refuelling halt en route. At Tambaram, the troops confined themselves to the tarmac and the runway shoulders. After breakfast on the tarmac itself, the troops, along with the loads, shifted from the AN-32 to the IL-76 and AN-12 aircraft, which had arrived in the night. By then, it was known that the first wave of aircraft had landed safely at

10. Paradrop as an option had been ruled out.
11. Interview with MWO HS Mann.

Hulule. Distribution of ammunition continued after take-off from Tambaram. The troops also primed their grenades in the aircraft.[12]

After landing at Hulule, the troops moved to Malé in *dhonis*. They were settled in the football stadium on the island and were assigned specific tasks over the following days.

Friendly Formation Returns to Agra

Within 45 minutes of its touchdown at Hulule, the Friendly Formation got airborne again after delivering the Task Force, along with its paraphernalia. The two aircraft were in Trivandrum by 2315h. Brig Malik and Gp Capt Goel updated the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C), Southern Air Command, on the conduct and progress of the operation until then. The two aircraft returned to Agra by 0500h on November 4. The sixth aircraft was being readied at that time.

The crew of Friendly Formation had been awake for nearly 24 hours when landed back at Agra.

12. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

8

"Mr President, We've Arrived..."

"Mr President, We've Arrived…"

The Friendly Formation delivered the troops, jeeps and guns, and then set course back for Agra. The troops had fanned out in all directions and secured the island. At the head of a small group of men, Maj Dhillon went for the ATC tower. Toting a loaded sten machine carbine, with a finger on the trigger, Dhillon ran up the flight of stairs. His men followed him like a shadow. Despite a tiring day, they were remarkably alert, and watchful for signs of the presence of hostile elements. They knew that any rebels hiding in the building could cause great harm. A Military Operation in Urban Terrain (MOUT) was so different from the Counter Insurgency (CI) operations in which the troops of 6 PARA Battalion had been involved during their previous tenure.

The team reached the top of the building in seconds. Dhillon pushed open the door to the top floor of the control tower. Inside, there were scared men, talking on the phone line. They became fidgety when they saw armed soldiers barging in. In a universal gesture of surrender, they raised their empty hands and turned towards the walls. Speaking in English, they conveyed that they were *friendly* controllers and urged Dhillon to hold fire. The time he had spent in India's insurgency prone east and north had trained Dhillon's eyes to identify friends/foes; and his mind and fingers, to respond, depending on the stimulus. He lowered his

weapon and gestured to the controller to calm down and hand over the receiver. The person on the other end of the line was Maj Mohammed Zahir of the National Security Service (NSS) of the Maldives.

The Maldivian major apprised Dhillon of the situation in Malé. He told the paratrooper that the rebels had caused havoc on the island; they had fired a rocket and breached the wall of the NSS HQ. Dhillon advised the Maldivian to block the hole in the wall with gunny bags (filled with sand) to prevent the entry of the rebels into the NSS complex. He assured the major of assistance reaching Malé in a short while.

The initial apprehensions subsided as the troops took control of the airfield and the ATC tower. WO Karam Singh and I had followed Dhillon's men to the top of the tower. It was the ideal place to control a paradrop from. From atop the tower, we would have a good view of the drop zone (the airfield); we would have access to communication sets and we would also get to know the actual surface winds to facilitate an accurate paradrop.

Brig Bulsara, Mr AK Banerjee and some others came to the tower in a while. The Maldivian controllers established communication with President Gayoom who was hiding in a house on Malé Island. They handed over the receiver to Brig Bulsara who spoke with an air of assurance, "Mr President, we have arrived. I am Brig Bulsara of the Indian Army…" Bulsara conveyed the greetings of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Mr Gayoom and reassured him of his safety and that the Indian troops would soon secure Malé Island. He sought the details of Gayoom's confidants on the island who would guide the troops to his (Gayoom's) hideout.

Meanwhile, the power supply and water supply teams of 411 PARA proceeded to protect the installations and, if need be, operate them. A task force was also ordered to take over the jetty and relieve the company of 6 PARA.

"Discretion is the Better Part of Valour!"

As said earlier, Vasanthi, the commander designated by Maheswaran for the mission in the Maldives, was killed in the initial exchange of fire with the NSS men. Although Luthufee had hatched the plot with Maheswaran and had accompanied Vasanthi to Malé, he was not a sworn member of the group. He was not their second-in-command or an operational commander either. He did not have direct control over them. So, for a while, the PLOTE cadres were without effective leadership until another senior member of the group, Raju took charge.

At 2200h, the first IL-76 aircraft landed at Hulule, followed within about fifteen minutes, by the second. The high decibels generated by the aircraft had risen to a crescendo when the pilots applied reverse thrust on the engines to shorten the landing run. There was no way to muffle the engines; the time had come to put aside the much desirable stealth and secrecy. The noise reached Malé Island, heralding the arrival of the Indian troops. Luthufee and his men noticed the big birds landing and they observed the activity on the airfield from a distance. The noise of the aircraft parked for a brief while on the tarmac (with the engines still running), and the activity on Hulule Island, could be heard and seen by the rebels on the neighbouring island. Even in the dark of the night, the silhouettes of the armed *jawans*, and the hustle and bustle following the landing of the two aircraft on Hulule Island drew the rebels' attention. Normally, this should have jeopardised the operation by giving away the position, but, in this instance the effect was diametrically opposite. The rebels—ignorant of the actual strength of the Indian troops—overestimated their numbers and were overwhelmed. They feared that a very large force had landed.[1] They reevaluated the prospect of the success of their endeavour. Being leaderless in a foreign land was an uneasy situation. Luthufee and his men realised the futility of pursuing

1. The perceived asymmetry has been discussed at length in the chapter titled "Anatomy of Cactus."

their goal under those changed circumstances. "Discretion is the better part of valour"—they decided to abandon their mission, and flee. Years later, in an interview to a local newspaper, Luthufee aired his grudge, "Had India looked the other way, we would have succeeded." [2] Rankled as they were by the arrival of the Indian troops, they left a trail of death and destruction on the way to the harbour. They had killed 19 people by the time they reached the harbour.[3]

The fishing trawlers, which the rebels had used for travelling from Sri Lanka to the Maldives, had returned to Sri Lanka soon after the rebels had disembarked the previous day. They ferreted around for a vessel, fit and ready with crew to whisk them away as soon as possible. The stars were favouring Luthufee. To his good fortune, a Merchant Vessel (MV), the *Progress Light* had just dropped anchor. The vessel's cargo included cars, premium liquor and other merchandise from England, to be disembarked at Malé. MK Jayadevan, the Indian owner and captain of the ship,[4] and the crew of about 20 men, were still on board. Luthufee, along with his men boarded the vessel. At gunpoint, the rebels forced the crew to weigh anchor and steer the ship out of the harbour.

A fleeing Luthufee foresaw an unfavourable end to his adventure. So, to be able to bargain a safe passage later, he took seven hostages[5] on board the MV *Progress Light*. The hostages included the Minister of Transport of the Maldives, Ahmed Mujuthaba, and his European wife—Luthufee's prized catches.

2. Shamindra Ferdinando, "How Luthufee Moved SAARC Venue from Male to Addu," *The Island*, November 10, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=38818. Accessed on October 16, 2016.
3. Shekhar Gupta, "Close Shave," *indiatodayin*, February 9, 2012, available at http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/maldives-president-coup-india/1/172857.html. Accessed on June 15, 2017.
4. LK Sharma, "Indian Commandos Free Hostages," *The Times of India*, November 7, 1988, p. 2.
5. Adm Sushil Kumar (Retd), "A Thorny Operation," *Quarterdeck*, 2012. The number of people taken hostage by Luthufee varies from source to source.

It was a hasty exit. In the very little time that was available to him, Luthufee could not re-muster all his men still shooting around in the streets. Three of his men, trying to get away in a rubber dinghy, were caught. They could not take the bodies of two others who were killed. Several others had received gunshot injuries. Oblivious of their team having fled, the men left behind continued fighting pitched battles and went into hiding when the Indian troops came on the scene. Sporadic firing could be heard until much after Luthufee had left Malé.

It was going to be a dark night. Just about five days from the new moon, the moonrise on November 4, 1988, was forecast at 0151h in Malé. The moon would be over the local meridian only at 0830 h with an illumination of about 25 per cent. This gave several hours of absolute darkness to the rebels to escape. Taking advantage of the cover of darkness, the vessel could have easily slunk through the channel that separated the islands of Malé and Hulule. But in an attempt at deception, Luthufee kept all the lights of the merchant vessel *ON*. The fleeing Merchant Vessel was fired at by Bulsara's man (for details read chapter title: "The Endgame").

Bridging the Sea

A total of 14 speedboats including the local *dhonis* were mustered from two tourist resort islands and brought to the jetty. The civilian operators of the boats were a scared lot—the firing, and the prevailing tense atmosphere on Malé Island discouraged them from ferrying the troops across the strait for the beach assault. To add to the woes of 411 PARA, the motorboats had Yamaha engines and push button starting procedures, with navigating wheels. The sappers were unfamiliar with these boats. But the more experienced among them, who had handled similar equipment earlier, showed confidence and came forward to handle them. The boats were put in their charge. Hav PD Bhagat and Hav Surat Singh led the way. Others, including the local civilians, followed them.

In all, twelve boats were employed for the move. The route for each boat column was briefed to the operators with the help of some landmarks on Malé Island, which were visible from the jetty at Hulule. Each boat had one sapper to guide the boat to the designated beach and organise the movement of boats back to Hulule to continue the build-up.

The boats operated continuously till all the troops of 6 PARA, 3 PARA and 60 Parachute Field Ambulance were inducted into Malé. The build-up of troops on Hulule Island continued through the night and on the following days.

Tranquillity in Times of Crisis

The need and probability of a paradrop diminished considerably as control over the island became firm and tranquillity permeated the atmosphere. If at all a paradrop was to be undertaken, it would be at, or after, daybreak. It had been a long day for Karam Singh and we did not know what was in store for us the next morning. So, I ordered the old man to go down to the passengers' lounge and relax. Feeling physically jobless temporarily, I settled down in the ATC tower in a chair overlooking the sea. A paradrop was still churning in my mind. Down below, in the subdued light, I could visualise the activity as the troops prepared to move to Malé in the boats. The day's fatigue[6] coupled with a brief period of inactivity conspired to make me doze off several times. It was an uneasy calm.

Capture of BeachHead at Malé

After securing the ATC tower and the airfield, 6 PARA handed over the charge of security of Hulule Island to 3 PARA and prepared to move to Malé. The boats of the assault wave that lined up to ferry them were manned by the brigade's sappers (411 PARA). Maj Dhillon and Capt MK Singh (in different boats) with their men set out to land at Malé on the reclamation area. Dhillon recalls having

6. It had been a long day; most of us had been on our feet for close to 18 hours.

crossed the wake of the fleeing rebel ship. At the Malé end, the troops had to wade through two feet of water, as the depth of the water was less at the beach end. Small boats with less draught carried troops to the shallow southwest beach. Larger *dhonis* ferried a platoon to simulate an assault landing on the main jetty at Malé. The commanding officer, 6 PARA, was taken across to Malé in a subsequent ferry.

Rendezvous with the President[7]

On reaching Malé, Dhillon, MK and their men hid by the side of a solitary path as they consolidated their position. They saw a cyclist going past and feared that he might compromise their position. They pounced on him and brought him to the ground. It was a matter of chance that the cyclist turned out to be an NSS man in plain clothes—the man who had been detailed to guide Dhillon to the defence minister of the Maldives. Dhillon and his men followed him to the house of the defence minister. En route to the defence minister's location, these men hijacked a pick-up van and enhanced their mobility. The defence minister gave another guide who led Dhillon to the president's hideout.

Dhillon's men cordoned off the president's hideout and knocked on the door. But the men guarding the president's hideout were hesitant—they did not want to take any chance with strangers. Dhillon came up with an instant solution; he lined up the Sikh members of his team in front, to gain their (the Maldivians') confidence. His ingenuity worked; they let the Indians in. Dhillon met the president in the servant's quarters. He was with his wife, daughter and two of his trusted men. Dhillon conveyed the complements of the Indian prime minister to the much-relieved Maldivian president. MK gave toffees to the little girl to allay her fears and give solace to the little soul.[8]

7. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.
8. This little girl would grow up to be the foreign minister of the Maldives.

Catharsis for Bulsara!?

Maj Dhillon's rendezvous with President Gayoom worked as catharsis for Brig Bulsara. It was a great relief that the main objective had been attained. But his sense of alleviation was momentary. With sporadic firing still going on, the safety of the Maldivian president became an even graver concern for Bulsara. He expressed his heightened anxiety to Maj Bhatia: "*Ab agar president ko kuchh ho gaya to badi badnaami hogi*,"[9] which translates as: "It will be a great shame if something happens to the president now." As if telepathy between the commander and Maj Dhillon was working in real time, Dhillon felt equally concerned about the president's safety. He made a human shield around Gayoom and moved him and his family to a safer location in the premises of the headquarters of the National Security Service. MK continued to stand guard for the president. The rest of the column lifted the siege on the headquarters of the National Security Service.

A Relieved Indian Prime Minister

At the NSS HQ, Dhillon got an overseas call through to Delhi (through the naval advisor in Sri Lanka). Expecting one of the prime minister's aides on the line at the other end, Dhillon requested, "Kindly put the prime minister on the line for President Gayoom."

"Speaking," came the reply. Rajiv Gandhi was awake, awaiting the call, "I am Rajiv Gandhi, your prime minister. Thank you, major…." Gayoom took the next few minutes to thank the Indian prime minister for the military intervention.

Brig Bulsara, Col Joshi and Mr AK Banerjee called on the president in the next few hours and reassured him of the efforts to secure the islands and rescue the hostages.

60 PARA Provides a Healing Touch

The desperation of Luthufee's men reached a high on not finding President Gayoom. They vented their frustration by terrorising

9. Interview with Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia.

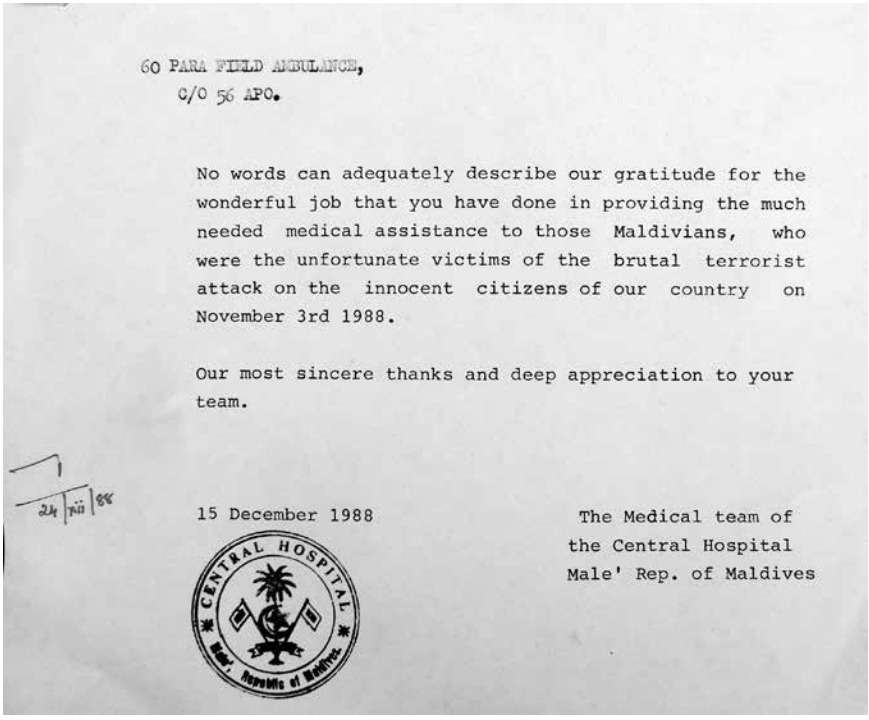
people—by hurting and injuring them as they went about rampaging the shops. They hurt and injured innocent people as they walked the streets. The number of civilians who needed medical aid kept mounting as time passed. The Civil Hospital at Malé didn't have enough capacity to hold the patients.

A surgical team of 27 medics that had followed the main force at Hulule got down to business instantaneously. The medics crossed over to Malé to tend to the injured. The hospital superintendent was not to be found; confusion and chaos reigned. Maj AK Sharma who headed the surgical team took charge of the hospital, which had been devastated. Meanwhile, sporadic firing continued in the area and casualties—both military and civilian—continued to pour in unabated. There was constraint of space and it was becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate fresh arrivals.

As a first step towards restoring normalcy in the medical care, all patients who were undergoing treatment in the hospital, but did not need a high level of medical care, were discharged. The new arrivals, with minor injuries, were given first aid and relieved. Only those patients who needed major surgery or serious medical care were retained. The hospital had specialists—anaesthetists and gynaecologists—who hailed from different countries: Russia, France and China. All of them worked as a team.

The casualties that needed even greater attention were moved to Hulule and evacuated to the Military Hospital (MH) in Trivandrum by air. The detachment of 60 PARA Field Ambulance remained operational at the Civil Hospital until normalcy was restored. It re-joined the main body of the unit when the situation improved. The detachment rendered yeoman service in the Civil Hospital; the local authorities felt the need of their continued assistance for more time. So, a detachment of the unit comprising two officers, one JCO and eight ORs stayed back to support them when the unit was finally flown back to Agra. The medical team of the Central Hospital Male' conveyed their gratitude in a letter

to 60 PARA.



60 PARA FIELD AMBULANCE,
C/O 56 APO.

No words can adequately describe our gratitude for the wonderful job that you have done in providing the much needed medical assistance to those Maldivians, who were the unfortunate victims of the brutal terrorist attack on the innocent citizens of our country on November 3rd 1988.

Our most sincere thanks and deep appreciation to your team.

15 December 1988

The Medical team of
the Central Hospital
Male' Rep. of Maldives

CENTRAL HOSPITAL
Male' Republic of Maldives

Facsimile of the letter from Central Hospital courtesy 60 PARA.

Battle Axes Show Power[10]

Back in Trivandrum, the armed Mirage aircraft were serviced in the night because one did not know what requirement would come up and when. The crew were prepared to get airborne at short notice although they had had a hectic day. The night too was disturbed because they were put up in tents on the tarmac and there was aircraft movement all through the night.

Next morning, the Battle Axes got their initial tasking from Air Headquarters (VB). Later, the orders were routed through Southern Air Command/17 FBSU. The initial directions were to

10. Based on interviews with AVMs R Nambiar (later air marshal) and JS Panesar.

strafe the ship carrying the rebels. To achieve that end, only the front guns, which are otherwise meant for aerial combat, could have been used. They could have been effective in targeting the bridge of the vessel and disabling it. In due course, the offensive role of the Mirages was toned down to a low flypast in a bid to show force to express solidarity with the Maldivian government and to shake the morale of the rebels who were still hiding on the islands. The flypast would also reassure the strife-torn people on the islands.

At 0800h, the Battle Axes were ordered to go ahead with force projection. The aircrew determined the coordinates, prepared their maps/ charts and planned the route for navigation. At 0900h, Battle Axe 1 (Wg Cdr AV Vaidya, the commanding officer) and Battle Axe 2 (Flt Lt R Nambiar) lined up to take off in close formation from Trivandrum. Nambiar's aircraft suffered an engine computer failure on the take-off run. The flight lieutenant weighed and considered his options and decided to continue with his take-off. "Mission first, always!"

The formation flew the 600 kms to Malé at 6,000 ft above ground level in clear weather. They did not observe any ship en route. A half hour later, the other two aircraft (Panesar and Dhanda) followed suit. The four aircraft flew low (500 ft above sea level) over Malé and the neighbouring islands. The sunbathing tourists, oblivious of the happenings in Malé, did not know why the Mirage fighters were invading their privacy. Both the details returned to Trivandrum in about two hours. The NSG were still in Trivandrum looking for a place to settle down. They were finally transported in a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) vehicle to some temporary accommodation in Trivandrum.

The Battle Axes returned to Gwalior in two days.

More Airlift Continues to Bolster Strength

Three guns were airlanded and deployed in the night. The

ammunition was moved from the aircraft to the gun position in baggage trolleys; it was retained on wheels to cater for contingencies. Three more aircraft were airborne from Agra later in the night and landed the troops in the early hours of November 4, 1988.

The statistics speak volumes about the airlift undertaken by the air force during Operation Cactus. Between 2200h on November 3, 1988 and 0930h on November 4, 1988, nearly 800 fully equipped troops with vehicles had been airlanded. By 1100h, 1,650 troops and 16 vehicles had been positioned. The AN-32 fleet airlifted 672 personnel on November 5, 1988.

A total of 15 AN-32, one AN-12, two Avro and six IL-76 aircraft were pressed into service for the airlift. At one stage, 25 AN-32 aircraft were operating between Agra, Trivandrum and the archipelago.

9

The Endgame

Luthufee's Gambit

The MV *Progress Light* approached the narrow channel between Malé and Hulule gingerly. It was a slow lethargic manoeuvre but not at all stealthy. The ship was well illuminated, with all the deck lights burning brightly. It was an attempted deception by Luthufee—a ploy to appear *normal*. He hoped that the Indian troops would not fire at a harmless merchant vessel. To Luthufee's misfortune, Brig Bulsara thought differently, "…we knew it had to be an enemy vessel because no one else would put out to sea at such a time with all the fireworks on."[1]

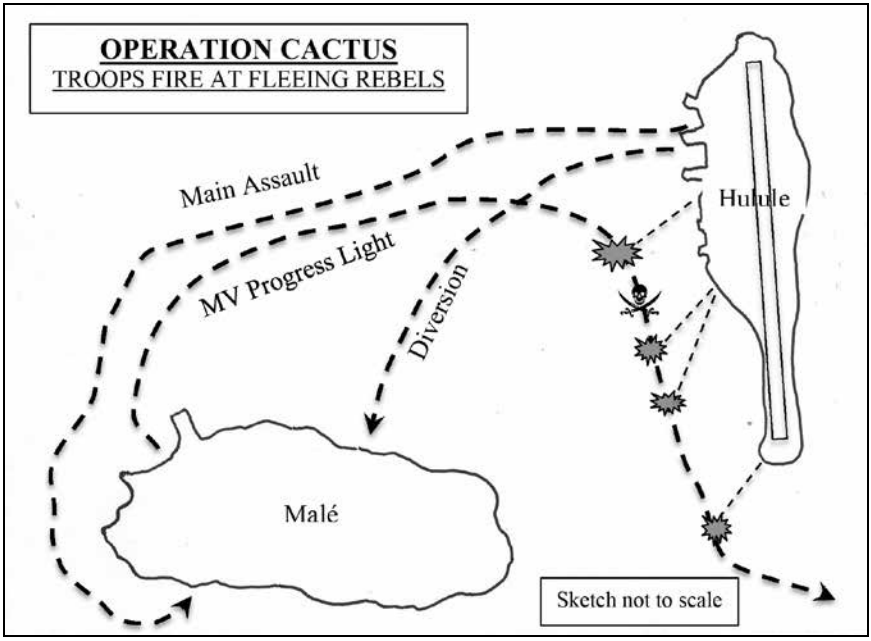
In the dark moonless night, the brilliantly lit ship offered a tempting target as she sailed past Hulule Island. Brig Bulsara ordered his men to open fire at the sprawling broadside of the vessel. The Carl Gustav Teams of 3 PARA and a company of 6 PARA on the west end of the island had a field day, taking pot shots at the slow moving target.

Half asleep in the tower, I was jolted by the sound of the booming guns. The vibrating walls and glass panes of the control tower gave the impression of a mild earthquake. Under those circumstances, the tower did not appear to be the safest place to be in. I ran down the steps and came out of the building with WO

1. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim, AVSM (Retd), ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1993). pp. 202-235.

Karam Singh. There was a feeling of unease at being without a personal weapon when the bullets were flying.

We saw Brig Bulsara shouting orders. After some more rounds had been fired, I heard the brigadier exclaim, "We've got a hit!" The ship had taken some hits, although in the dark night it wasn't possible to assess the extent of the damage. Maj Umed Singh at the far end of the island joined in with his Medium Machine Gun (MMG). Because of the heavy fire and the resultant hits, the ship was damaged[2] and could not cruise efficiently; there was a problem steering it. Nonetheless, the vessel was still partially seaworthy and pressed on regardless.



It was close to 0430 h when the ship disappeared over the dark horizon. Initially, she had headed for Java in Indonesia.[3] But she

2. Shamindra Ferdinando, "Rajiv Saved us From Gayoom," *The Island*, November 3, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article- details&code_title=38318. Accessed on April 14, 2013.
3. Shamindra Ferdinando, "Male Plot Leader Speaks Out," *The Island*, November 2, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=38250. Accessed on August 17, 2017.

had fuel that could last only for ten days—barely enough to enable her to sail all the way to Java. So, on second thoughts, Luthufee changed course towards Colombo. Moving in an easterly-north-easterly direction, Luthufee's men had about 90 minutes to make good their escape before daybreak; for after dawn, the search for the rebel ship would intensify.[4]

Heightened Concern for Hostages

Once the president was secure, the issue of rescue of the hostages gained urgency. Back in New Delhi, the concern for the Swiss wife of the Maldivian minister brought the Indian prime minister and the Swiss ambassador to the Naval War Room in South Block. Initially, the Indian Navy was tasked to establish a *cordon sanitaire*[5] around Malé and Hulule. Later, rescuing the hostages became the primary task of the Indian Navy (IN). The IN launched its IL-38 MR aircraft for air patrols to locate the rogue ship. Throughout the night, the MR aircraft kept track of all the ships in their patrol area.

INS Betwa Braces Up[6]

The MR aircraft directed INS *Betwa*, with the idea of intercepting *Progress Light* before the latter could enter the Sri Lankan waters.

The news of the coup and the rescue operation launched by India hit the headlines all over the world even as the IL-38 and helicopters of the IN scanned the sea for the merchant vessel, The accomplices of the rebels monitoring the world news in Sri Lanka, spread the word through some local radio stations that the men on board the MV *Progress Light* were being harassed by the IN.

INS *Betwa* received occasional updates from the FOC-in-C (West) and the NHQ. While on the move, the ship was informed that the MV *Progress Light* had left Malé at 2330h on November 3. There were clear instructions against attacking the MV due to the

4. The sunrise on November 4, 1988, in Malé, was at 0550h.
5. Interview with Capt (IN) ARC Verma.
6. Based on the *Naval Perspective* of *Operation Cactus* by Cmde (IN) HA Gokhale.

presence of the hostages on board. At about 1330h on November 4, the NHQ gave the likely position of the rogue ship, as passed on by the MR aircraft. While the search was in progress, the involvement of two more ships was conjectured.

Assuming that MV *Progress Light* would head for Colombo or some port in Southeast Asia, *Betwa* decided on an intercept search of a fan shaped area between courses 060° and 120°. The search was made difficult due to the varied inputs about the speed of the target ship—9 knots as per NHQ and 5 knots as per Headquarters Western Naval Command (HQ WNC). Besides, there were limitations of the MR aircraft. Capt (IN) Gokhale continued the search and took his decisions regarding the fusing state of his ship's guns to be prepared for hostile action, if it did take place. The crew were ingenious and used all means to re-inforce their defences before the encounter; they used *atta* bags for fortification. It was a herculean task to carry the bags to the crow's nest[7] to fortify it against sniper fire. The fact that the MV *Progress Light* had 10 days' fuel on board, had diminished the possibility of her going to a South Asian country. Its likely destination had narrowed down to somewhere in Sri Lanka.

The US Navy Contributes its Bit

In one of its reports, the MR aircraft (IL-38) conveyed sighting a warship in the area with a helicopter deck. In those days, very few countries could afford such capability. The USSR, and the US for sure, had warships with helicopters on board. At 2230h on the same day (November 4, 1988), INS *Betwa* spotted a helicopter on its radar-scope. Later, a warship of the US Navy came by. She was operating the Light Airborne Multipurpose System (LAMPS) and was equipped to spot surface vessels in its area of operation. The American warship passed on the position, course and speed of MV *Progress Light* to the Indian warship.[8]

7. *The Crow's Nest* is the highest point on a ship's mast, used as an observation post.
8. Gokhale, n. 6.

A Restrained Approach

INS *Betwa* had been directed not to fire at MV *Progress Light* because of the presence of the hostages and crew on board. Their mandate was to tail the ship but not establish communication with her—a team of negotiators from Malé was to arrive on the scene. Since it was a case of Maldivian hostages on a foreign merchant vessel in international waters, the authorities in Delhi were not in a position to grant any concessions to the rebels in return for the hostages.

The Indian warship was hesitant to exceed its mandate by getting physically involved in the hostage crisis. The apprehension was based in the fear that the incidental/ accidental killing of the hostages—in case the Indian sailors/ troops made an attempt to rescue them—would raise many undesirable questions.

INS *Betwa* Catches up with the Rebel Ship

INS *Betwa* finally spotted the MV at about 0340h on November 5, 1988, steering 070˚ at 7 knots. Under strict instructions from Delhi, she trailed the rebels from a distance of 6 nm. The presence of an Indian warship in the proximity rang alarm bells for the rebels. They tried numerous ways of dissuading INS *Betwa* from continuing the chase: through the night, they kept begging, persuading and threatening INS *Betwa* to allow them to proceed with their intended plan. Seeing the desperation of the rebels, the Indian captain feared a possibility: he wondered what would happen if the hostage ship did a reverse trick on Betwa and boarded her.[9] To instil a sense of fear of the Indian sailors in the minds of the rebels, the men on INS *Betwa* toted arms as they kept moving about on the deck of the ship; occasionally, they moved the ship's guns too, to project power. At 0835h on November 5, the rebels showed the first signs of cracking up—they expressed a wish to negotiate, which was communicated to Delhi. Meanwhile, INS *Betwa* sighted a fast moving ship and chased her, assuming her to be an accomplice of the rebels. After a while they returned to MV *Progress Light*, their primary target.

9. Ibid.

More was happening in the Indian Ocean; the Indian Navy was mustering more ships to project power and intimidate the rebels.

Enter INS *Godavari*

On that fateful day when Luthufee's men were raiding Malé, INS *Godavari* was returning from a sojourn in Australia after participating in their bicentenary celebrations[10]—an event organised to mark 200 years since the arrival of the first fleet of British convict ships at Sydney in 1788. On the way, the frigate touched the island nation of Papua New Guinea. On that day, the banner headline in the *Papua New Guinea Post* read: "Threat of Coup [in Papua New Guinea] Probed by Army." It would be with a sense of *déjà vu* that, later in their voyage, Capt (IN) Gopalachari and the crew of INS *Godavari* would embark on a mission to thwart a coup in another country in the Indian Ocean—the Maldives.

INS *Godavari* was equipped with torpedoes, Anti-Aircraft (AA) guns, and other weaponry and a Seaking helicopter to perform a variety of roles. She had anchored in Port Blair for fuel and customs clearance. Port Blair and Bombay were separated by considerable distance. It was difficult for a frigate of *Godavari* class to cover the distance in *one go*, without refuelling. Capt (IN) Gopalachari had decided to skip another refuelling halt at Cochin so that the crew could make it home in time for Deepawali.[11] This was not a norm because a direct cruise from Port Blair to Bombay was constrained by fuel considerations.

A refuelling halt en route to Mumbai was a necessity, almost.[12] To make it to Bombay without spending time refuelling on the way, they were doing 120 rpm for the most economical speed. A directive from the NHQ forced them to steer clear of their agenda. They were ordered to intercept MV *Progress Light*.

10. The bicentenary of Australia was celebrated in 1988. It marked 200 years since the arrival of the first fleet of British convict ships at Sydney in 1788.
11. It happened to be his wedding anniversary too.
12. Interview with Capt ARC Verma (IN) (Retd) who, as a lieutenant commander was the senior engineer officer on board, the INS *Godavari*.

The captain ordered revving up of the engine to 160 rpm, which nearly doubled the speed. It doubled the fuel consumption too.

A team of Maldivian negotiators, including Maj Adam Saheer,[13] was flown from Malé to Colombo. Then they were delivered on board INS *Godavari* by a helicopter. INS *Godavari* cruised at an unusually high speed for its class of ship for nearly two days with the crew extra vigilant on watch-keeping duties. The ship's Seaking helicopter scanned the area continuously to locate the MV *Progress Light*. Next morning (November 5, 1988), INS *Godavari* spotted the target ship.[14] The captain established communication with the occupants on Channel 16, and demanded that the ship change course either towards an Indian or a Maldivian port.

To begin with, the rebels were intractable. They tried in vain to get out of the reach of the Indian ships. Then, they demanded mid-sea negotiations to settle the dispute. Alternatively, they sought to be allowed to proceed to Colombo and demanded intervention by an international team. The MV defied instructions to stop, or to change course. Meanwhile, the PLOTE men on board began communicating with Maheswaran in Colombo and sought directions in the difficult situation they were in.

INS *Tir* Joins the Fray

Around the time when INS *Betwa* and INS *Godavari* were getting their instructions to go in pursuit of the rebel ship, another Indian ship was in the region, cruising towards Cochin. INS *Tir* was a training ship that had sailed on a foreign cruise to Mauritius/ Seychelles as a part of training of the cadets. She was heading back to Cochin; the cadets on board were exercising at sea. A few days hence they would be completing the training and facing written and practical examinations. It was the responsibility of Capt Ravi

13. JJ Robinson, "I Wanted to Get Rid of Gayoom at any Cost: Abdulla Luthufee," *Minivan News*, November 7, 2011, available at http://minivannews.com/politics/"i-wanted-to-get-rid-of-gayoom-at-any-cost"-abdulla-luthufee's-sri-lankan-interview-27904. Accessed on April 14, 2013.
14. Verma, n. 12.

Kochhar,[15] the CO of INS *Tir* to ensure that the cadets returned to Cochin in time for the next phase of their scheduled training—the final examination and the passing out parade. In a bid to bear maximum force on the adversary, the NHQ directed Capt (IN) Kochhar to alter course and steer towards Malé at best operational speed.

INS *Tir* made quick calculations and altered course. She reached Malé in the morning of November 5, 1988, at about 0800h, anchored in the harbour and landed at the jetty. Capt (IN) Kochhar called on the officials of the Maldivian government and offered assistance. They patrolled the islands by boats to apprehend those of Luthufee's men who had not been able to board the MV *Progress Light*.

A Weakening Resolve in Colombo

The military intervention by India in the Maldives made prominent news the world over on November 4, 1988. On the following days too, the media gave it wide coverage. Lack of support apart, such publicity led to the weakening of Maheswaran's resolve to pursue the mission. This is evident from his overtures to the Indian HC in Colombo on the following days. He met the Indian diplomat and sought refuge for the rebels in Tamil Nadu.[16] He pleaded that MV *Progress Light* be received by the Government of India at Madras or any other port in Tamil Nadu. The PLOTE cadres on board *Progress Light* were willing to surrender to the Indian authorities and India could deal with the Maldivians as they pleased. Dixit apprised Maheswaran of the legalities. He told him that if the ship was captured in the Indian waters, she would be taken to an Indian port and the Maldivians on board would be extradited to the Maldives and the Tamil militants to Sri Lanka. Maheswaran left displeased.[17]

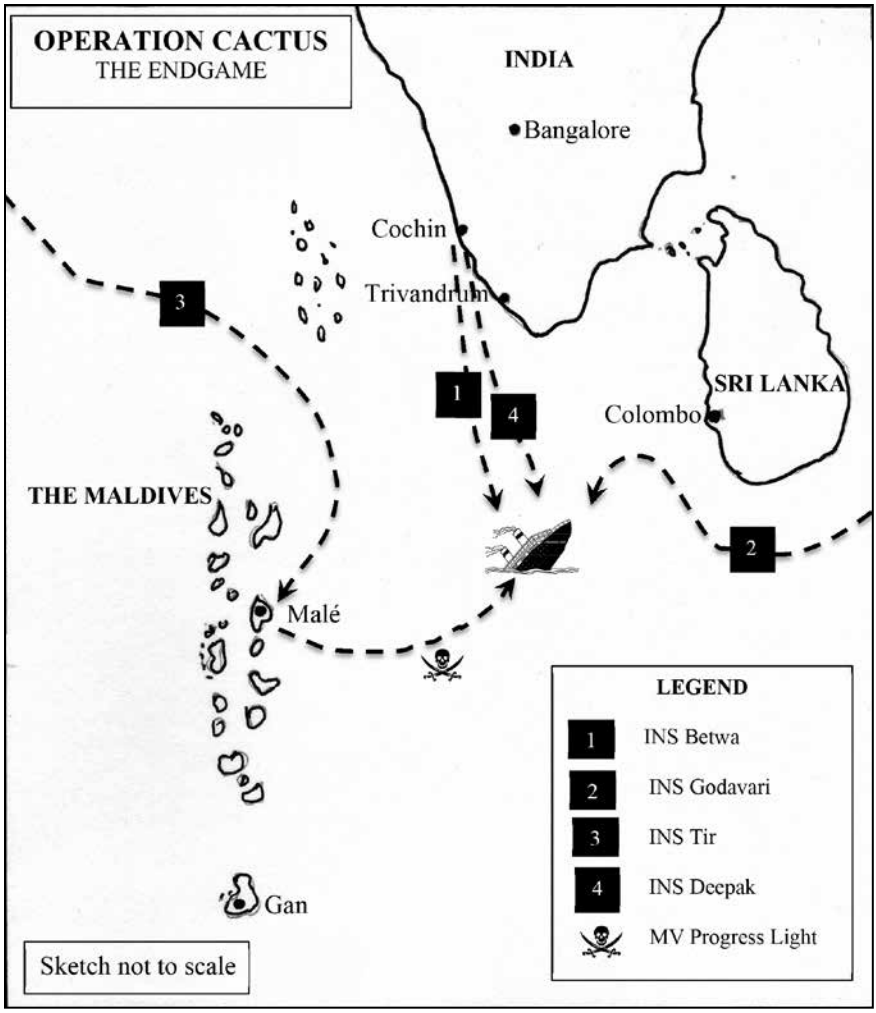
15. He was also the commanding officer of the training squadron.
16. Maheswaran had not met the Indian HC for months prior to November 3, 1988.
17. JN Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (New Delhi: Konark, 1997), pp. 264-265.

Failed Negotiations and Captain's Dilemma

The talks between the Maldivian negotiators and the rebels took place on the radio sets. Although their exchanges were cordial they bore no result. Capt (IN) Gopalachari informed the authorities in India about the failed attempt at getting the rebels to surrender and that they wanted to head for Sri Lanka. All this while, the MV continued inching forward regardless and the rebels continued to grow more daring as they got closer to their supposed haven. The Maldivian negotiators feared deepening of the crisis if the ship were to enter the Sri Lankan waters. The authorities in Delhi also grasped the gravity of the situation and issued directions to: "*Stop the ship at any cost*." But, to begin with, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) were unclear. Says Cmde Gokhale, "I could imagine the predicament in the War Room. The Directorate Tactics was tasked to revise the ROE and we had reached an impasse deciding whether to fire, and when to fire weapons in that typical limbo period called the precautionary stage, when there is definitely no peace nor is there, a declared war. Operation Cactus was an even greater tangle."

At that stage, INS *Godavari* sought INS *Betwa's* readiness to fire at the rebel ship. Although ready, Capt (IN) Gokhale was in a dilemma about which directions to follow. The FOC-in-C West had directed *Betwa*, in no uncertain terms, to *merely shadow* the MV *Progress Light*. And here was the captain of INS *Godavari*—although not nominated as Officer in Tactical Command (OTC)—seeking fire support. The issue was resolved when in due course INS *Godavari* was nominated as the OTC. Meanwhile, to bolster the Indian Navy's strength in the face of this opposition, INS *Deepak* was tasked to come to the scene of action with 25 personnel of the Indian Marine Special Force (IMSF)[18] on board. (See the sketch for the movement of the ships).

18. In later years, the IMSF metamorphosed into the Marine Commandos (MARCOS) a force to reckon with.



Maheswaran's Last Gambit

The PLOTE men were in constant communication with Maheswaran. Annoyed by the developments, the PLOTE leader directed his men on board MV *Progress Light* to kill a hostage. Despite resistance from the Maldivian minister on board, the PLOTE men complied with Maheswaran's instructions. They killed a hostage and threw his body overboard. If the aim of this brutality was to deter INS *Godavari* from continuing the chase,

the rebels failed miserably. The dastardly action neither moved the Maldivian negotiators nor deterred the Indian warships from pursuing their prey. According to Luthufee, "The Maldivian negotiators on board the Indian warship wanted all of us killed."[19] Capt (IN) Gopalachari maintained the pressure. His dilemma moved up a few notches when, around midnight, he received revised instructions from Delhi to be *firm* with the rebels.

End of the Tether: Guns go Blazing

An impasse had been reached: the rebels knew that the IN would not give up pursuit and the IN knew that the rebels would not surrender unless they were coerced. On a message from the NHQ that the rebels wanted to speak to Singapore, INS *Betwa* jammed the signals being transmitted by the MV. Then, after several warnings on 156.8 MHz (Channel 16),[20] INS *Godavari* resorted to firing around the MV with its 57 mm guns from a range of 2,000 to 3,000 yards. The tracers indicated the hits on the MV. The firing emboldened the rebels; they continued moving forward. The return fire of the rebels lacked range and was ineffective. At 0250h, *Godavari* directed *Betwa's* fire at the forward part of the rebel ship to cripple her. *Betwa* opened fire with both barrels and let go of 47 rounds. In the absence of night spotting capability, accuracy was difficult to achieve. The close range gunfire of *Godavari* was aimed at the aft mast and the funnel.

In another round of firing at 0430h, INS *Godavari* opened up her 57 mm guns; some shells hitting the rebel ship. INS *Betwa* fired 24 rounds. Again, at 0550h, INS *Godavari* fired her AK 230 AA gun at close range. Retaliatory fire from the rebel ship also continued. During the exchange of fire, the oil barrels stacked on the deck of MV *Progress Light* caught fire. It is difficult to say what caused the fire—the hits from the blazing guns of INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa,* or some technical reason—but the rebels dowsed

19. Ferdinando, n. 3.
20. This is the open frequency for communication at sea.

the fire soon and controlled the damage. Despite the hits, the MV kept inching forward.[21]

The Rebels Start Buckling

This cat and mouse game continued for some time as Gopalachari spoke in Tamil, his mother tongue, to impress upon the rebels the futility of pursuing their endeavour. But she continued to crawl forward regardless. The rebels were desperate to enter the territorial waters of Sri Lanka, as that would complicate matters, giving them some hope of a legal exit. Firing became a tricky issue when the ships entered the busy Colombo-Gulf sea traffic lane: other ships passing by had to be warned to clear the area fast.

Meanwhile, another development in Colombo revealed a fissure in the resolve of the rebels. Maheswaran returned to the Indian HC, in the afternoon with an extraordinary request. He informed him that MV *Progress Light* was heading towards the west coast of Sri Lanka. He wanted Dixit to request President Jayewardene to allow the vessel to berth at a Sri Lankan port, and grant political asylum to the Maldivian rebels, and amnesty to the Tamils involved in the coup. The HC declined and instead advised him to approach the Sri Lankan authorities directly.

It appears that Maheswaran did manage to communicate, and plead, with the Sri Lankan authorities for leniency but to no avail. President Jayewardene was determined that under no circumstances would he allow the ship to berth at any Sri Lankan port.[22] Orders had been passed to the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) to sink the ship if she dared to enter Sri Lanka's territorial waters. Timely communication between the Directors of Naval Operations (DNO) of the Indian Navy (IN) and the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) ensured some sea room for the IN to manoeuvre.[23]

21. Verma, n.12.
22. Dixit, n. 17, p. 265.
23. Adm Sushil Kumar, "AThorny Operation," *Quarterdeck*, 2012.

INS *Godavari* Tightens the Screws

In Delhi, the patience had started wearing thin; there was apprehension that the SLN might carry out their threat. So the hostages had to be rescued at any cost before the ship entered the *danger zone*. Some time after daybreak, Capt (IN) Gopalachari received clear instructions: "Stop MV *Progress Light* from reaching Colombo!" According to Cmde Gokhale, "There could not have been a clearer ROE." *Godavari* was also directed to airlift the IMSF commandos from Sri Lanka.

In a determined bid to stop the rebels, the Seaking helicopter took off from INS *Godavari* and dropped two depth charges in quick succession in front of the bows of the MV. The explosions caused a mini tsunami. The vessel was thrown vertically upwards out of the water and dropped twice. This scared the occupants of the vessel no end. But the rebels continued to show resilience. They threatened to commit suicide, if need be. At that juncture, *Betwa* closed in and recommenced firing. With sunrise, the trajectory of the shells could be seen more clearly. By about 0845h, the MV had been hit twice and there was a major fire on the mid-ship.

The incessant firing from the Indian ships and the blaze on the deck led to the failure of the power supply and, eventually, the fear of the MV sinking. This forced the rebels and hostages to rush to the deck of the ship. The hostages congregated on the quarter-deck (aft side of the ship) and gestured and pleaded with the IN ships to stop firing.[24] The rebels also came up on the deck (hands raised)—they radioed their intention to surrender. They were directed by *Godavari* to stand away from the hostages on the forecastle deck (front of the ship) with their hands raised.

The Hostages Heave a Sigh of Relief; so do the Rebels

The crew of INS *Godavari* took advantage of the situation; lowered their boats in the water and asked the hostages to disembark the

24. Or, may be, the rebels coerced them to file up on the deck and beg for restraint.

MV and get into the lifeboats one by one. Some hostages jumped overboard and were picked up by the Indian sailors. Fourteen hostages, including the Maldivian minister, his wife and the crew members were rescued and brought on board *Godavari*. Only the second engineer was missing.

Bursts of rounds from the LMGs of the ship were fired as the rebels were being extricated from the MV to keep them under extreme mental pressure. The message was clear: "You will be shot at if you do not cooperate." The boarding party searched the merchant vessel once all the survivors on board had disembarked. They found several dead bodies in the ship. Among the dead was the second engineer of the MV whose corpse lay in the engine room. The IN sailors collected some relevant documents from the vessel.

Raju was the last man out. The rebels, mostly in the age group of 18-21 years, were thoroughly searched. Some were stripped to their skin to ensure that they were not carrying any weapons. There were no handcuffs or a compartment to keep the rebels isolated and locked. They were tied with nylon ropes and accommodated in the helicopter hangar under guard. Luthufee resisted the treatment meted out to him. He identified himself as the president of the Maldives and demanded that he be treated with respect that is due to the head of the state of a country. He was blindfolded; his hands were tied behind his back and he was locked up in a toilet. *Godavari's* doctor attended to the injured. Minor injuries were treated on board; hostages with major injuries and trauma (including the Maldivian minister), were evacuated by a helicopter to the Military Hospital in Trivandrum.[25]

MV *Progress Light* Capsizes

It was sunset and getting dark. INS *Betwa* took charge of *Progress Light* with a view to salvage her to Cochin the next morning. In the night the MV went off the radar of INS *Betwa*. She capsized

25. Verma, n. 12.

about 56 miles southwest of Colombo. The lifeboats and some other equipment floating on the sea surface were the tell-tale signs of her being consigned to the ocean floor.

Theories abound about the reasons for the sinking of *Progress Light*. According to Luthufee, the ship sank as a result of the damage caused due to the heavy firing by the Indian troops at the time of her departure from Malé.[26] Another plausible explanation is that Raju, before leaving the engine room in the end, had opened the sea-chest valves to the sea, scuttling the ship.[27]

Back in Malé

INS *Godavari*, with the rebels and the rescued hostages on board, set course to Malé where INS *Tir* awaited her. The captured mercenaries were taken to the detention camp located on Gamadoo Island. President Gayoom came on board the ship and thanked the crew for their role in rescuing the hostages. While INS *Betwa* and INS *Tir* left Malé within a week, INS *Godavari* patrolled the islands and provided security cover to the archipelago for a month before returning to Bombay. About 500 Indian paratroopers stayed back in the Maldives at the behest of the Maldivian government to sanitise the islands and help restore normalcy. Twenty suspects were rounded up during the searches.

Cleaning Up the Mess

Next day onwards, the troops (including 7 PARA) went on a *house-to-house* search in tandem with the NSS to snuff out the cadres of the PLOTE and take charge of their arms and ammunition. The locals and the foreign tourists assisted by leading the search parties to different parts of the buildings. Malé was cleared in a day though the search continued for three days.

Rations, including Meat On Hoof (MOH), started arriving in IL-76 and AN-12 aircraft. As tension eased, the troops did some

26. Ferdinando, n. 3.
27. Verma, n. 12.

joint training with the NSS men. 3 PARA and 7 PAPA returned directly to Agra in the IL-76 aircraft after about 10 days of action in the Maldives. During the searches carried out by the Indian troops, unexploded bombs and grenades were recovered from some islands. They were diffused/ neutralised by Lt MJ Kumar (411 PARA) and his team. The sappers contributed silently towards restoring normalcy.[28]

Aftermath

All those involved in the coup—the Maldivians and Sri Lankans alike—were taken to Malé. Luthufee was interrogated on an island off Malé by various agencies, including India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW).[29] Unsurprisingly, four Maldivians including Luthufee, were given the death sentence by the Maldivian courts. Twelve Sri Lankan Tamils (PLOTE members) who had spearheaded the assault were awarded 25 years.[30]

In a dramatic turn of events, PM Rajiv Gandhi persuaded President Gayoom to commute the death sentences to life imprisonment. In the interview to Shamindra Ferdinando in November 2011, Luthufee expressed his gratitude to the late Indian prime minister thus:[31]

> "The late Indian Prime Minister intervened on our behalf. What he did was exemplary. The Maldivian dictator was summoned on Sept. 16, 1989, to New Delhi, where he was told he couldn't impose the death penalty. Had the Indian Premier turned his back on us, Gayoom would have gone ahead with his plan. All of us are grateful to those Indian intelligence officers for briefing the Indian political leadership regarding the Maldivian political crisis. Thanks to them, Gayoom couldn't deceive the Indian leader."

28. Bulsara, n. 1.
29. Ferdinando, n. 2.
30. Ferdinando, n. 3.
31. Ibid.

On this return to Malé, the very next day (September 17, 1989), President Gayoom declared that he did not want to shed any more blood in Malé; he commuted the capital punishment imposed on Luthufee and his accomplices to life imprisonment.

Prolonged Peace

President Gayoom was thankful to all the countries that had extended support to the Maldives in their time of need. He was especially grateful to India for the prompt response. In the days that followed, he was ungrudging in his praise for India and for Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Voice of Maldives and TV Maldives echoed his sentiments. With due regards to the sentiments of the hosts, the Indian contingent withdrew after restoring normalcy. Peace prevailed in the Maldives for the next twenty years of Gayoom's rule.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was replaced through a democratic process in 2008.

COMPREHENDING CACTUS

10

The Anatomy of Cactus

The study of contemporary military history has already gone way ahead of the drums, bugle and trumpet approach.

— Col PK Gautam[1]

Analysis of a military operation through the lens of the Principles of War and the doctrines taught in military academies, institutions and colleges is fraught with an incumbent risk—the risk of looking for stereotypes. For the same reasons, judging an operation strictly against the theories propounded by thinkers and strategists like Sun Tzu, Chanakya, Clausewitz and others of that ilk is likely to restrict the vision; there is a possibility of overlooking what might have happened *out of the box* or what could have been done differently. The earlier sections of the book dealt with the historical aspect of Operation Cactus. What follows is an objective study of the operation—how situations developed and why certain things happened the way they did; and how and why certain actions were taken during the different stages of decision-making, planning and execution of Operation Cactus.

It would help one comprehend Operation Cactus better if one understood that it was an unprecedented situation in the Maldives, which demanded a unique military solution; a crisis for

1. Col PK Gautam, *The Need for Renaissance of Military History and Modern War Studies in India*, IDSA Occasional Paper No. 21 (New Delhi: IDSA, 2011), p. 3.

which there were no readymade answers, no previous experience and no perfect solutions.

Operation Cactus and the Charge of the Light Brigade!

Limited intelligence and lingering uncertainty had lowered the probability of the success of Operation Cactus considerably. Some rated it close to zero when the Friendly Formation took off from Agra. The odds were stacked so heavily against the Indian Task Force that even after the successful completion of the operation, people have compared it with the *Charge of the Light Brigade*, albeit with a pleasant end. Such comparisons have stemmed from the fear that the rebels could have easily taken control of the airfield and prevented the landing of the Indian aircraft.

Apprehensions like these raise doubts about the very prudence of embarking on Operation Cactus. They put into question the rationality of the decision. One wonders whether the highest echelons of the leadership who took the bold decisions—both political and military—were adequately armed with the much-needed expert, unvarnished advice. The following description will bring out the method in the apparent madness and bravado.

Beaching as an option to convey troops to the Maldives was given a pass considering the constraint of time. Airlanding of troops at Hulule was under active consideration when doubts were raised about the security of the runway. The uncertainties were haunting: was the runway safe to airland the troops? Were the inputs about the safety of the runway reliable? Could any of the transmissions about the situation on the islands be under duress? What if the situation changed and the rebels took control of the airfield before the arrival of the IAF aircraft? The mission would end in massacre of the troops as had happened during the Charge of the Light Brigade (Battle of Balaclava, 1854). The memory of the disastrous Jaffna University raid by the IPKF in Sri Lanka was recent and fresh in the minds of the decision-makers and the planners.

Howsoever horrifyingly low the prospect of success appeared, there was a way out of the sticky situation: the crew of mighty jets had struck a balance between the fuel and the payload—they had calculated and carried sufficient fuel in their fuel tanks to be able to return to Trivandrum in case a change in situation so demanded. This entailed cutting down on the payload, which was done to the displeasure of the brigade's aircraft loading party that had come with load as per the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)—for them: "An IL-76 aircraft was meant to carry 40 tonnes of load. Period!"

Thus, the IL-76 aircraft that took off from Agra had the endurance and range to fly from Agra to Hulule and return to Trivandrum without touching down at Hulule. This option would have been exercised in case the situation on the island had changed, the regime had changed, or the airfield had fallen into the hands of the rebels. Likewise, the situation would have been different had fighting ensued after the first aircraft landed. A skirmish between the Indian troops and the rebels on the runway and the tarmac, which was a possibility, would have delayed or prevented the landing of subsequent aircraft.

A paradrop had been considered but the idea had been relegated to a lower rung on the priority ladder because of its low viability. This aspect has been elucidated in the chapter titled: "*Chhatri Mata ki Jai.*"

To land was a difficult and bold choice for the protagonists of Operation Cactus. The trio of Bewoor, Bulsara and Goel took the courageous decision despite haziness. Difficult choices have been made under similar trying circumstances in the past. Uncertainty prevailed when the first wave of Dakota aircraft was to airlift Indian troops to secure Srinagar in October 1947. The Indian Air Force pilots on that mission were briefed to circle over Srinagar airfield and look for signs of its occupation, by the raiders. Under no circumstances were they to attempt to land unless they were sure that the airfield was safe—it had not been captured by the

raiders.[2] That was indeed a tall order because: how would someone spot gunmen hiding in bushes on the airfield? And, how could one prevent a gang of trigger-happy armed men storming the aircraft after it landed? Similarly, despite Poonch being threatened by raiders and an aircraft receiving bullet hits in the main fuel tank while returning after landing troops and supplies on the makeshift airfield (J&K operations, 1947), Air Cmde Mehar Singh had directed his pilots to fly in howitzers which were critically required by the Indian Army to defend Poonch. The aircrew were told to fly at night without lights. They were advised to retract their undercarriage in case they felt that they were likely to overshoot the runway on the landing run—the howitzers were to be delivered at any cost. The loss of an aircraft, and a set of crew, was acceptable to their commander.[3]

In the case of Operation Cactus, the political leadership had taken a bold decision on the basis of the confidence instilled by the military leadership. Within the available means, steps had been taken to know the status of security on the island of Hulule until the aircraft landed in the hostile environment. The overseas telephone call which the Maldivian foreign secretary had made to Mr Ronen Sen earlier in the day, had not been disconnected; it was kept alive and manned continuously, and information about the prevailing situation was being passed on to Delhi on a regular basis. According to Mr Ronen Sen, there was an understanding that if the people passing the information from the Malé-end were under duress, they would use a certain pre-decided uncommon word repeatedly in their transmission, implying: "The runway is unsafe! Do not land!"[4]

The speedboats and the *dhonis* had been cleverly removed from Malé to prevent the rebels from reaching Hulule. The

2. Air Mshl (Retd.) Bharat Kumar, *An Incredible War: IAF in Kashmir War 1947-1948* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2007), p. 46.
3. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh (Retd), *Defence From the Skies* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2007), p. 56.
4. Interview with Mr Ronen Sen.

runway lights had been kept switched *OFF*; they were switched *ON* only momentarily at the time of touchdown. And, equally importantly, radio silence had been maintained all through. Only a short while before the first aircraft came into the range, did the controller in the Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower utter the code word: "Hudia!" conveying that the runway was safe for landing.

In effect, it was possible to abandon the operation at any time until the aircraft finally landed. It was indeed a calculated risk, which paid off. Whether in the case of Srinagar and Poonch (1947-48) or the Maldives (1988), perhaps the favourable end state in all the cases has justified the risks taken. It is also true that if one were to wait for a propitious moment to launch a military operation under conditions of uncertainty, one would have to wait till eternity.

If there is any similarity between the Charge of the Light Brigade and Operation Cactus, it ends at the extreme risk faced by the two armies.

Professional Advice

All through the process of decision-making, planning and execution of Operation Cactus, paradrop as an alternative remained on the cards and in the minds of the protagonists. The issue was discussed at length at all stages but professional advice, although available at hand in Delhi and in Agra, got overlooked. The Assistant Director of Operations (Para)—the authority on paratrooping who was available in Air Headquarters, and who could have rendered expert advice—was somehow left out.[5] Likewise, the chief instructor of the Paratroopers Training School, Agra, *the* specialist on airborne training and operations who was available at the functional level in Agra and who could have made a valuable contribution, was somehow forgotten.[6]

5. Interview with Wg Cdr JVK Mahajan, the assistant director of operations (PARA) in Air Headquarters in November 1988.
6. Interview with Wg Cdr VP Lal, the chief instructor of the Paratroopers Training School, Agra, in November 1988.

Maldives: The Indian Connection

It is generally believed that Operation Cactus was the first occasion when the Indian troops operated in the Maldives. At least, this was the belief of those who took the decisions, planned and executed the operation. Not really! The 52 Parachute Field Battery (now a part of 17 PARA) had operated in the Maldives during the Second World War. In 1943, a troop of 52 Field Battery (then 33 Ahir Battery) was in the archipelago for nearly ten months.[7] Likewise, a unit of the Punjab Regiment had also served in the Maldives during the war. Maj RJS Dhillon who spent a few months in the Maldives after the conclusion of Operation Cactus says that on Gan Island there are tombstones that bear the names of Indian soldiers. Besides, Engineers India Ltd, under the aegis of the Airports Authority of India (AAI), had constructed the runway at Hulule.[8]

The above facts were not common knowledge when the operation was being planned and the preparations were being made. Detailed records of those visits of Indians to the Maldives were not accessible.

Why India? Why not Sri Lanka, Pakistan or the US?

The world was oblivious of the impending coup in the Maldives—at least, that was the impression one got from the antecedents. And since it was not anticipated, it came as a surprise. When it did take place, Malé flashed SOS messages to several countries, including the secretary general of the Commonwealth. According to TIME magazine, requests were made among others, to the US and the UK. Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Sri Lanka and the US responded with offers of assistance. In his address to 1,200 guests after taking the oath of office for the third 5-year term, President Gayoom thanked those countries for offering assistance.

7. Regiment History, 17 Parachute Field Regiment, 1977-1988, p. 114.
8. Interviews with Mr Ronen Sen and Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

Washington and London took the request under consideration.[9] Colombo was the closest from where an operation could have been launched. A 150-strong team of Sri Lankan Special Task Force commandos stood by, but the mission was aborted when India took the lead. The US Marine Security Detachment on Diego Garcia was put on alert and was told to standby for deployment to the Maldives. A P-3 Orion and a C-141 aircraft were put on standby alert.[10] The US could possibly have launched a military operation from Diego Garcia.[11] Karachi (Pakistan) was closer to Hulule than Agra from where the Indian troops had taken off. In terms of distance from Hulule, Agra was the farthest—the US, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were better placed than India to provide military assistance (See Box: Distance Chart).

Distance Chart		
From	To	Distance
Agra	Hulule	2,598 km
Trivandrum	Hulule	611 km
Colombo	Hulule	764 km
Diego Garcia	Hulule	1,285 km
Karachi	Hulule	2,400 km
Gan	Hulule	450 km
Gan	Diego Garcia	741 km
Note: Distances are as per Internet sources, including Google Maps.		

Though none of these countries was handicapped by way of capability or capacity and some of them had even alerted

9. Hafeez R Khan, "Rajiv Leaps into the Ocean," *Morning News*, November 17, 1988.
10. "Maldives: A Victim of Indian Foreign Policy?" November 3, 1988; "Terrorist Attack and GMR in Perspective," November 2, 2012, *Rajje News Blog*, available at http:// raajjenews .blogspot .in /2012 /11 /maldives-victim-of-indian-foreign. html. Accessed on July 31, 2015.
11. A possible reason for the US not responding to Gayoom's SOS could be the US presidential elections scheduled less than a week later.

their forces, yet they *waited and watched* until India took action. They sought time to get going. The plausible explanation is that those countries had weighed the pros and cons of undertaking an operation of this nature. They had recognised the major risk in committing troops; their military prudence outweighed their diplomatic considerations. Seeking time when the situation demanded immediate action was perhaps just another way of declining politely.

India was not under any compulsion to respond, In fact, if India had not acceded to the request, no one else in the region was so keen to go out of the way and provide succour instantly. Pakistan had already declined; China couldn't have helped in any way. For India, declining to offer military assistance would not have led to a loss of face geopolitically.

Why then, did India take on the commitment?

There could be two explanations. Firstly, it is ingrained in the Indian psyche to respond favourably to requests for assistance in times of dire need. This was not the first time that India was extending a helping hand to the head of a state in distress. In November 1950, India had evacuated King Tribhuhvan Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal[12]—an action that paved the way for the strategic Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Friendship and strong people-to-people bonds, which have stood the test of time. Operation Lal Dora (Mauritius, 1983) and Operation Flowers Are Blooming (the Seychelles, 1986) were other operations in which troops had been committed to assist legitimate governments in those countries. A year earlier (in 1987), Kuldip Sahdev, who was a part of the decision-support and planning team of Operation Cactus was also involved in the planning of a similar operation to rescue President J Jayewardene.[13] That the need did not arise to embark on that mission is a different matter.

12. ACM P.C. Lal, ed., Ela Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), pp. 74-75.
13. J.N. Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (Delhi: Konark, 1998), p. 143.

Secondly, this was an opportunity for India to project itself as a regional leader through genuine action. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had discussed the issue with the staff of the diplomatic corps before taking the decision to accede to the demand for military assistance. A positive response from all quarters, coupled with the confidence of the military leadership, led him to take the step. It was extremely risky but certainly not a case of senseless bravado.

For the Maldives, it was a choice between help readily available and assurances. They chose the former. India's promptness paid off.

Assistance, Intervention or Aggression?

The situation was fluid in the Maldives when the SOS massage reached the Indian prime minister. President Gayoom was in power, though in hiding. The rebels were combing Malé to find him. The request for assistance was from a head of state—*still* at the helm—to another head of state. Therefore, any assistance provided by India—military or otherwise—was legally right and legitimate. It could well be justified within the ambit of international law. Now consider a possibility: if, before the Indian troops landed at Hulule, Gayoom had been found (read *caught*) and his government had been dismissed summarily, and a provisional government had taken charge. The apprehension of this lingering possibility turning into a reality persisted all through the operation and haunted the Indian camp. It was axiomatic that the new government would be hostile. Under the changed circumstances, the landing of Indian troops would be considered unsolicited assistance. It would be viewed as an intervention or, worse still, an aggression. The exercise could result in a diplomatic *faux pas* and military debacle, which India could have ill afforded, particularly in view of the setbacks in Sri Lanka in the preceding year.

It was a political decision to intervene; a decision well supported by the diplomatic corps. The lightning action of the Indian armed forces prevented the intervention from metamorphosing into

aggression; it was, indeed, a calculated risk. Don't all military operations have some inherent risks?

Bonhomie at its Best

Bonhomie was at its best between the diplomatic corps and the armed forces; rare mutual trust and faith prevailed. The team of diplomats: Ronen Sen, Kuldip Sahdev, AK Banerjee and others, had personal equations with officers in the three Services. Gen VN Sharma, Air Mshl Nirmal Suri, AVM Denzil Keelor, and others, reciprocated the regards for the diplomatic corps. They respected each other's professionalism and communicated uninhibitedly. They were on the same page on issues of national interest: Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka, or Operation Cactus in the Maldives.

There was exceptional synergy among the three Services. One of the main reasons was that the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) and the Chief of the Navy Staff (CNS) were away and the vice-chiefs of the air force and the navy were at the helm—a general was dealing with a rank lower in the other two Services. There was willing acceptance of the leadership of the COAS by the two vice chiefs. Right or wrong, it is a strongly held perception that perhaps things wouldn't have progressed as fast as they did, had the permanent incumbents (the CAS and the CNS) been present in Delhi that day. The protocols would have been different then.

There was more to the cooperation within the armed forces than mere respect for seniority. The COAS and the VCAS were both *Rimcolians*. The VCAS and the VCOAS were course-mates from the first course of Joint Services Wing (JSW).[14]

Brig Bulsara, as the commanding officer of 4 PARA, had served under Gen VN Sharma when the latter had commanded 17 Mountain Division. The *good old bond* enabled the COAS to nudge the brigade commander to achieve the impossible. Says Gen VN Sharma, "Bulsara was my buddy."

14. The JSW metamorphosed into the NDA.

Family bonds too might have had some positive effect. Mr Ronen Sen's brother, AVM Tushar Sen was an air force officer—an additional reason for Sen's regard for the armed forces. And, whether it made a difference or not—Gp Capt Bewoor was related to Brig Sapatnekar and Sahdev. He was a *Rimcolian* too.

It is incidental that the Director, Naval Operations, of the Indian Navy, Sushil Kumar and his counterpart in the Sri Lankan Navy, Cmde Clancy Fernando were *old friends*—Fernando had been a student of Sushil Kumar at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (India).[15] At a critical a time, Sushil Kumar could prevail on Fernando to get some *manoeuvring space* for the Indian warships close to the Sri Lankan waters.

There was a high level of mutual confidence in each other at the functional level. The air force was agreeable to any mode of delivery suggested by the army—airlanding or paradropping; the time of take-off was changed continuously until a day landing became a night landing. Even the crew were changed to accommodate a last minute requirement of the army. Brig Bulsara expressed the army's confidence in the air force's ability to deliver in the following words on the capability of Gp Capt Bewoor:[16]

> I heaved a sigh of relief when I found that Gp Capt Anant Bewoor, CO 44 Sqn AF was to fly us in. Groupy Bewoor is an archetype of Second World War flier; methodical, cool, no nonsense. I knew, with him we could fly to hell and back.

Jointness, Jointmanship, …

Jointness is a hackneyed word!

— Anonymous[17]

15. Adm Sushil Kumar, "A Thorny Operation," *Quarterdeck*, 2012.
16. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim, ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1993), p. 211.
17. Repartee by an air officer in response to a letter written by a staff officer (of a general officer) complaining about lack of *jointness* when a snag developed in the aircraft positioned by the IAF to convey the general officer.

The protagonists of Operation Cactus hold contrasting views on the issue of *jointness*. The opinions vary: "The operation succeeded because of *jointness*!" "There was no *jointness* whatsoever!" "There was *jointness* between the air force and the army but the navy was on its own!" Those differing perceptions are the outcome of unique expectations of each individual/Service and may be attributed to the cognition and bias of the people. Seen from a distance, Operation Cactus might give the impression of a sequential operation with the roles of the Indian Air Force (IAF), the Indian Army (IA) and the Indian Navy (IN) being contiguous: first, the IAF airlifting the paratroopers to Hulule; then the paratroopers securing the runway and the islands, and rescuing President Gayoom; and in the end, the IN intercepting the rebel ship after a hot pursuit and rescuing the hostages. A closer and more probing look suggests a high degree of interdependence and support among the three Services and the diplomatic corps. Among other reasons, the operation succeeded because of the *jointness* among the agencies involved.

This was yet another instance when the men in uniforms of different hues rose to the occasion to accommodate each other's requirements to achieve a broader objective. The IAF not only positioned the required number of transport aircraft—refuelled and readied in time—to airlift the troops, but also accepted the method of delivery most suited to the army despite the inherent risk.[18] All through, the men worked together single-mindedly but there were some hiccups. Here are some instances, which bring out the highs and the *not-so-highs* of *jointness* during Operation Cactus.

A good example of *jointness* surfaced when minutes before the take-off, Gp Capt Bewoor and Gp Capt Goel placed the SOPs and books of rules aside to accommodate a dire operational need of the PARA Brigade commander. They interchanged the crew of the

18. There was animated discussion on whether to paradrop troops or to airland them. The IAF stood by the decision of the Indian Army despite the inherent risk of landing the Task Force in a hostile environment.

two aircraft—something not done under *normal* circumstances—to ensure that he (the brigade commander), along with his team of chosen officers and essential brigade elements, was in the lead aircraft. Another exception was the distribution of ammunition, and priming of the grenades in flight. Although this is a flight safety hazard, it was allowed in the interest of the mission.

As per performance specifications, an IL-76 aircraft is meant to airlift a payload of 40 tonnes—this amount can vary depending on the fuel carried in the onboard fuel tanks of the aircraft. Sometimes, a fraction of this capacity goes unutilised because all the available space in an aircraft cannot possibly be used due to physical constraints and the need to ensure troop comfort. In Operation Cactus, since there was uncertainty about the security of the runway at Hulule, it made sense to carry sufficient fuel so that the aircraft could return to Trivandrum (without touching down at Hulule), if mandated by tactical considerations. This *extra* fuel had to be carried in lieu of some other cargo. Thus, when the loadmaster of the IL-76 aircraft advised the loading party of the PARA Bde to discard some of their less important load, they felt let down because, for them, the IL-76 aircraft was meant to carry 40 tonnes (not less than 36 tonnes, in any case). Reduction in load amounted to: "…wims and fancy of the aircraft [*sic*]".[19] Less educated and less knowledgeable on flight safety aspects, they *pruned* the load on paper to get past the loadmaster (read *hurdle*).

After rescuing the hostages, INS *Godavari* had remained anchored off Malé for some days, providing assistance of sorts to the local administration. For the captain and the crew of the frigate, the operation was still "ON!" And for that reason, they continued to be secretive about issues. So, when the Para Brigade tried to know their strength (number) to take stock of the military potential of the Indian contingent supporting the Maldivians, they refused to share the information—"Sorry, it is classified information which cannot be shared," was the response. It wasn't long before INS

19. Regimental History, 17 Para Bn, p. 123.

Godavari was compelled to give the manning state of the ship to the PARA Brigade to be able to draw rations for her sailors.[20]

Some of the hustle and bustle of Delhi and Gwalior was consigned to Trivandrum with the NSG and the Mirage aircraft (along with pilots and the ground crew) congregating at the airfield. The administration at the airport was not geared up to host a large population arriving at a short notice. There was no agency to host the men who had landed unannounced. Having been up on their feet all through the day, awaiting instructions for further action, the NSG men were *jobless*, tired and hungry. In a modest display of bonhomie, the Battle Axes[21] shared whatever food they had with the men in black.[22]

The acme of *jointness* in Operation Cactus was displayed by Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian high commissioner to Malé. His job was virtually over when the top brass dispersed after the conference in South Block. On being requested, he accompanied Brig VP Malik to Delhi airport (to brief the officer en route). Reluctantly though, he obliged by accompanying him further to Agra, to answer the queries of the task force about the Maldives. There he was prodded by Brig Bulsara to accompany the task force and to continue briefing them about the Maldives on board the lead aircraft. The diplomat cast aside his natural reluctance and all his fears and inhibitions and boarded the aircraft to guide the paratroopers. It is rare that an unarmed and militarily untrained civilian dares to join a military operation, which is fraught with peril to life. After the operation, Brig Bulsara proposed to the Army Headquarters (AHQ) that Banerjee's selfless contribution to the success of the operation be recognised. AHQ was not impressed—the proposal went unheeded.

A lot more happened in the Maldives in those 24 hours and on the following days, which can be termed *jointness*.

20. Interview with Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia.
21. No 7 Squadron is popularly known as the Battle Axes.
22. Interview with Air Mshl R Nambiar.

Author's Note

Interestingly, *jointness* is a rare quality, which we look for in our counterparts in the other Services/ organisations; seldom is it a subject of introspection. That said, *jointness* is a *cherished* virtue so very desirable in the armed forces. While strategists and *gurus* devote themselves to discovering insights and explaining this spirit, others brush it aside as a *difficult-to-achieve* abstract entity. Brazenly put by a seasoned warrior: "*Jointness* means what I have is mine; let's see, how we can share what you have." According to a Royal Air Force (RAF) veteran: "*Jointness*, so evident in difficult times, becomes a casualty when the government starts allocating the defence budget."

Suffice it to say, *jointness* lies latent in the hearts and minds of well-groomed warriors only to come to the fore when a situation demands it. It surfaced early, and remained afloat, during Operation Cactus.

Why Paratroopers? Why all the Way from Agra?

As of November 3, 1988, the IPKF had already spent more than a year fighting the LTTE in Sri Lanka. They were closer to the scene of action (Malé) than the PARA Brigade stationed nearly 3,000 km away, at Agra. They were among the first recipients of the information about the developments in the Maldives. They could well have been the first choice for deployment in the Maldives.

Having been involved in fighting the Tigers day in and out, their gunpowder was dry; they were battle-ready (read *battle-hardened*). They would have reached Malé much faster than a task force launched from Agra. There was another advantage: The geographical location of the IPKF (close to the Maldives) would have increased the endurance of the airlift aircraft over Hulule considerably; enough to orbit several times and ascertain whether or not the runway was in safe hands, before committing to land. Besides, the

PARA Special Forces Battalions—1 PARA, 9 PARA and 10 PARA[23]—were also deployed in Sri Lanka. Briefly, the IPKF was well placed, and was capable of undertaking the operation in the Maldives. In addition, regular infantry troops were available within the Southern Command of the Indian Army, who could have reached Hulule in much less time.

Perhaps the military leadership in Delhi did not want to lower the guard in Sri Lanka. Clearly, robbing Peter to pay Paul wouldn't have accrued tangible dividends. Therefore, notwithstanding the apparent advantage, the forces available down south were not disturbed.

Why the paratroopers? The simple reason is that employment of paratroopers offered at least one more option (for induction) than regular infantry soldiers—that of being paradropped. A more plausible reason for tasking the paratroopers in difficult situations anywhere, anytime, is summed up below:

> A warrior who will bail out at night onto a battlefield deep in enemy country while carrying fifty pounds of equipment, weapons, and ammunition is not likely to perform poorly in combat.
>
> — Lt Gen William P Yarborough[24]

Warning Time: Eight Hours versus Three Days!?

the PARA Brigade was entitled to three days of preparation time to mobilise.[25] But then some units/ elements of the PARA Brigade—6 PARA Battalion and 17 PARA Regiment, Engineers, Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and Army Supply Corps, etc—were airborne in less than eight hours from the time of the first message being

23. 10 PARA (SF) had fought valiantly when Indian troops were ambushed on the campus of Jaffna University.
24. Lt. Gen. William P Yarborough, cited in the Preface to Lt. Gen. Edward M. Flanagan Jr. USA (Retd.), *AIRBORNE:A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), p. x.
25. As per the norms and the SOPs (then, in the 1980s).

received by the brigade major.[26] Mobilisation that should have taken three days to accomplish was achieved, in part though, in just about eight hours. It was not that the SOPs were flawed and the prescribed timings inaccurate (inflated to cater to contingencies)—it was just that everyone in the chain rose to the occasion and performed at peak efficiency. Of course, some deliberate deviations[27] were resorted to without jeopardising or comprising overall safety and security. Later, using Operation Cactus as a yardstick, procedures and timings were refined and practised in exercises, for greater efficiency.

"Valkyrie"

The Friendly Formation was to maintain Radio Telephony (RT) silence to ensure secrecy. But for reassurance, they needed an updated *all clear* signal before they left the Indian air space. A code word: "*Valkyrie*," was given by AVM Denzil Keelor, the assistant chief of the air staff (operations), to be used when the formation went past Trivandrum. The ATC and the other agencies managing the air space had been told of this arrangement. The utterance of the code word by the ATC meant that it was *OK* for the formation to proceed. It implied that the runway at Hulule was still in safe hands.[28] While some associated with the operation do not recall this arrangement, according to Air Mshl Ashok K Goel, the code word was received overhead Trivandrum.[29]

26. There are different versions as to when was the information received by the brigade. Assuming that the brigade major was the first one to get the message from the then VCOAS, it can be said that the brigade was alerted at about 0900h.
27. These have been narrated in relevant contexts in other chapters.
28. Interview with Air Mshl Denzil Keelor.
29. Air Mshl Ashok K Goel, "The Facts : 3 Nov 1988 (Op Cactus from the Force Commander of the Operation)," April 16, 2012, available at http://airmarshalashokgoel. Blogspot.in/2012/04/facts-3-nov-1988-op-cactus-from-force.html. Accessed on March 7, 2013.

The Red Force: The Adversary

When you hear hoof beats behind you, don't expect to see a zebra.

— Rolf Dobelli[30]

To counter the rebels, it was essential to know their strengths and their capabilities—both these aspects were unclear until the very end of the operation. The driblets of information that trickled were received with suspicion. There were lingering doubts about the veracity of the inputs. In fact, unreliable inputs were worse than no intelligence: they led to presumptions and conjectures. Everything possible by way of capabilities (plus) was ascribed to the prospective enemy. Words and expressions like *Tamils*, *Sri Lanka, and LTTE,* etc. punctuated the first transmissions emanating from Malé to describe the Red Force[31]. As the messages were relayed and re-relayed, epithets like *mercenaries*, *terrorists*, *insurgents,* etc. got into circulation too. Since the armed men had come from Sri Lanka, and they were Tamils, they were construed to be the cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Therefore, in the absence of adequate intelligence, it was but natural that the capabilities of the Tamil Tigers were ascribed to the rampagers—professional and seasoned fighters, masters of guerrilla warfare.

The experience of the concurrent IPKF operations in Sri Lanka had led to overly exaggerated presumptions of the LTTE's capabilities. It was also a foregone conclusion that they would have the weaponry that the LTTE possessed and that like the skilled Tigers, they would be well trained in guerrilla warfare. Those who received and relayed the messages tinged a gradually building repository of information on the adversary. This had a definite effect on the planning and preparation.

30. Rolf Dobelli, *The Art of Thinking Clearly* (Great Britain: Sceptre 2013), p. 89.
31. In military parlance, it is a convention to describe the opposing force or the enemy as the *Red Force* and the friendly force as the *Blue Force*.

It was not only the background and the fighting skills of the rebels that was a matter of conjecture; even their strength was determined on similar lines. Thoughts like: "Err on the positive side," and "Never underestimate the adversary," must have reigned supreme in the minds of the terror-struck people reporting the situation from the Maldives. The decision-makers and planners must have been influenced similarly. An approximated figure was conveyed from the Maldives. Thereafter, with every report of the rebels being seen in the streets, the number was increased (read "inflated"). Possibly, the same gun-toting men were counted, re-counted and accounted for repeatedly by different people. The mayhem that they created and the hue and cry messages that poured in from Malé led some to estimate their number to be 500 to 800. Some others played safer still—they pitched their strength at 1,500 to 1,600.

Likewise, it was believed that they were armed with Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), Machine Guns (MGs), AK-47 assault rifles and grenades.[32] Some believed that they were equipped to shoot down an aircraft too.

The image of the adversary that had been created by the time the first wave took off at 1800h can be described thus: they were well trained Tamil Tigers numbering 500 to 800; well armed with missiles, RPGs, etc. But, the fact was that they numbered just 80 as per their leader, Luthufee.[33] They were a bunch of "*rag-tag mercenaries*"[34] mustered by Maheswaran at Luthufee's behest––they belonged to the PLOTE, a splinter group of the LTTE. They were not as well trained as the LTTE. They knew how to handle weapons but the military tactics and guerrilla warfare that were

32. As per historical records maintained by the IAF: Air HQ/99717/83/38/Org ACAS(I)/3/DJC undated.
33. JJ Robinson, "I Wanted to Get Rid of Gayoom at any Cost", Abdulla Luthufee's Sri Lankan interview, *MINIVAN NEWS,* November 7, 2011, available at http://minivannews.com/politics/"i-wanted-to-get-rid-of-gayoom-at-any-cost"-abdulla-luthufee's-sri-lankan-interview-27904. Accessed on April 14, 2013.
34. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee.

the forte of the LTTE were alien to them. Their attire—checked shirts and *lungis*—described by an eyewitness, suggested that they were not the ruthless ferocious fighters they were purported to be. They did not know President Gayoom—they could not have recognised him had he come face to face with them. It was, therefore, unsurprising that they could not catch him in the over twenty hours during which Malé was under their siege.

The rebels were not the cunning ruthless LTTE cadres that they were assumed to be; they were not naïve trigger-happy youth either. They were just a group of young men who had joined Luthufee in his endeavour to bully a democracy.

The Blue Force: In for an Overkill!

A *larger-than-life* image of the rebels created by the inputs from different sources led to very cautious planning. The plan was to neutralise 500 well-armed men with a force equivalent of a battalion group with its essential elements. This would require more than 20 AN-32 aircraft. The number of airlift platforms would vary considerably because it would not be a *normal* airlift of a battalion group—there would be the need to ferry boats and some bridging equipment to cross over the expanse of water between the two islands and other water bodies in the archipelago. Besides, the brigade commander had decided to carry artillery guns to supplement his firepower of machine guns, mortars and Carl Gustav guns. Since a paradrop was on the cards, a team of nine PJIs and the special equipment (cables and safety equipment for paradrop) had to be included too. What if the runway aids (lights and communication) were rendered unavailable after the first aircraft landed? Plt Offr Gambhir and four Air Field Safety Operators (AFSOs) came along to handle that situation, if it did come to pass. They carried a hundred *Goose Necks*[35] filled with kerosene to light the runway in case of a power failure.

35. *Goose Necks* are large kerosene lamps made from canisters. They are used as temporary replacement for runway lights to illuminate the runway during power failures. Their long necks resemble the necks of geese, hence, the name.

The records maintained by the air force suggest that 316 troops were airlanded in the first wave, along with two jeeps and essential equipment. More aircraft landed in the night; the landings continued until well after daybreak. Close to 1,100 troops had been airlifted by 0800h on November 4, 1988. Troops, logistics and ordnance poured in until the strength swelled to more than 1,600 troops. Besides the troops, artillery guns, boats, bridging equipment, arms, ammunition and rations were airlifted to Hulule. By mid-day on November 4, 1988, the Indian contingent had inducted teams of medics and engineers also. They contributed in restoring normalcy—while the paramedics took charge of the hospital and treated the injured, the engineers went about assisting in restoring amenities that had been wrecked in the last 24 hours.

In retrospect, such preparation and large movement of men and material would appear to be akin to using a sledgehammer to kill a fly (exaggeration intended). Not really! A more thoughtful analysis would suggest that this was a natural response to the stimulus, because in the morning of November 3, 1988, no one had a clear notion of the enemy's actual strength or capabilities. Beyond the meagre intelligence, one had to make do with instinct.

Perceived Asymmetry: An Arm Twister

We retreated towards the Malé harbour as the Indian paratroopers landed in the capital. We did not have any other option.

— Abdullah Luthufee

Actual asymmetry is one thing, perception of asymmetry is quite another. In the case of Operation Cactus both existed—some favouring the Indian troops, and others, the rebels. Incidentally, knowledge of the actual asymmetries was alien to both sides. Perceptions might have influenced minds on either side.

A perception of asymmetry (favouring the Indian task force) started building up in the minds of the rebels with a report of the

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio in the afternoon of November 3, 1988. It reported that help for the Maldives was on its way—a military contingent of hundreds of Indian commandos was being flown in to liberate the country.[36] A Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) aircraft of the Indian Navy flying over the islands may have reinforced that thought. Why the rebels did not respond to such ominous signs could well be the subject of another study.

In the night, the physical build-up of the Indian contingent commenced with the landing of 316 troops in the first wave. Stealth was not a virtue of the mighty jets. At the time of landing—except for a brief while—the runway and aircraft lights had remained switched off; but the engine sound wasn't. The mighty jets continued to produce high decibel noise, which travelled miles in all directions as the sea all around was devoid of obstructions. Their thunderous landings and the antecedents of the day gone by—the BBC news reports and the flight of the Indian Navy's MR aircraft—gave the Indian contingent a big psychological advantage. It was not possible for the rebels at Malé to see and gauge the size of the IAF aircraft landing at Hulule but the noise gave the impression of the massiveness of the airlifters. A vague estimate of the strength of the landing force was a natural outcome (See Box: Asymmetry Matrix).

Asymmetry Matrix (Pure Numbers)		
	Force Level (actual)	Force Level (perceived by adversary)
Own	316 (in the first wave)	1,500-1,600
Adversary	80	500

36. Sandeep Bhardwaj, "IPKF in Sri Lanka: Coup," *Revisiting India*, September 25, 2013, available at https://revisitingindia.com/2013/09/25/ipkf-in-sri-lanka-coup/. Accessed on September 26, 2016.

The other assumptions that go with the image of a *jawan* would have been obvious too––well trained, skilled and equipped; physically tough and seasoned; battle hardened, loyal…. [See Box: Asymmetry Matrix (Strength and Weaknesses)].

Asymmetry Matrix (Strength and Weaknesses)		
	Strengths	Weaknesses
Own	Training, experience, morale motivation, equipment	Intelligence, fatigue, vulnerability at the time of airlanding
Enemy	Entrenched, situational advantage	Amateur, ill-trained, low motivation, low morale after the killing of their leader, fatigue, inexperience

There is a possibility that all these happenings may have sent a ripple of common-sense through Luthufee's mind—a quarter of a century after he surrendered to the Indian Navy, in an interview to *The Island*, Luthufee said, "We retreated towards the Malé harbour as the Indian paratroopers landed in the capital. We did not have any other option." The rebels had been intimidated due to a perception of unassailable asymmetry.

The knowledge of perceived asymmetry in this case is a matter of hindsight. It has existed on numerous other occasions in the past. During the Indo-Pak War (1971), close to 750 troops were paradropped at Tangail (erstwhile East Pakistan). A radio broadcast, however, reported that 5,000 troops had been paradropped. This misinformation might have affected the morale of the Pakistani troops adversely.

In case of Operation Cactus, the perceived asymmetry was incidental and both sides were oblivious of the actual strength (numbers) of the other side. A deliberate effort to create such perceptions can pay huge dividends.

Dark Night: No Night Vision Devices

In November 1988, the phases of the moon were: third quarter on November 1; new moon on November 9; first quarter on November 17; and full moon on November 23. The night of November 3/4 (Thursday/ Friday) was a dark night. A crescent appeared rather late (0150h in Malé and 0145 hrs in Agra)—a little too late, a little too dim. It couldn't have bolstered either side's fortunes by its poor illumination but perhaps the darkness could have been exploited for camouflage and concealment. The Indian armed forces were yet to get the coveted night vision devices; the kinds of which were used by the Israelis a dozen years earlier in the Entebbe Raid (1976). It was an era in which the mindset was: why do you need such expensive night vision devices? Why can't you use helmet-mounted flashlights? Or, why don't you plan your operations by day?

Working on a *Need-to-Know* Basis

We know today that Operation Cactus was launched to rescue President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and to restore normalcy in Malé. Those who participated in that operation did not know about the crisis or the aim of the exercise when it commenced. People came to know of it gradually and in bits, on a *need-to-know* basis. The operational orders/ directives, which form the basis for the conduct of a military operation, were not issued before the launch of the operation. There was no time to indulge in that luxury. Everyone had to make do with *verbal orders* to go ahead. The operational directive for the IAF was issued about 10 days after the operation had concluded. The *ex post facto* orders were issued more for regularisation and accounting of the expenditure on the airlift than to meet an operational requirement, lest the air force and army incur the wrath of the auditors for infructuous airlift of troops and vehicles to the Maldives. The author is not privy to when the directives and orders were issued by the Army HQ and the NHQ.

In the absence of clear (read *written*) directions, people understood the aim as per their interpretation of the information

and verbal orders, and the instructions they received at different levels. Here are some interpretations made by different people:

- Maj VK Bhatia: "To rescue the president and bring him to Delhi."
- Maj RJS Dhillon: "There has been a coup in Maldives… about 500 mercenaries have landed there…. The president's whereabouts, and whether he is dead or alive are not known. We have to do an airborne intervention. Your Company [Delta Company] to be the Pathfinder Company…."
- Maj Harkirat Singh: "A Bn Gp is to be airlifted to Malé…."
- Flt Lt Ashok K Chordia (the author): "To establish a mounting base at Trivandrum for an airborne operation later in Sri Lanka."
- Indian Navy: "Coup in Malé…Indian naval presence in the area is essential."

How did this lack of information and working on a *need-to-know* basis, influence the operation?

This working on a *need-to-know* basis was partly intentional; and partly due to the lack of information. The operation owed a certain amount of secrecy to the fact that very few people knew anything worthwhile to share. Maj Dhillon disclosed the plan to his men only after his aircraft was airborne. Maj Harkirat Singh deliberately did not recall the school-runs lest people come to know that 'something was brewing.'

The quarter masters were briefed summarily to take care of logistics for a certain number of days. They prepared to establish a full-fledged cookhouse. They arrived at the aircraft with mess furniture to establish a *langar*[37] at the other end. They did not know that they were headed for a field camping site in a foreign land. They argued with the load master when he expressed his inability to accept their load. Maj Harkirat Singh had to intervene to resolve the issue.

37. A typical cookhouse and dining facility in field conditions.

Continuing in the same spirit, Radio Telephony (RT) silence was maintained and code words were used to communicate with controllers on the ground.

Notwithstanding the conscious effort of some of the officers to maintain secrecy, by late evening, the ladies and the families waving at the passing vehicles knew that the PARA Brigade was headed towards the Maldives. By the time, the third aircraft took off from Agra, the national news media had made it public that an operation to rescue President Gayoom by the Indian Army was on way. The Western media had also begun talking of a military intervention. Either it was very late by the time the rebels came to know of the operation through media reports or, they did not pay heed to such news.

The parachute jump instructors presumed that this airlift was to establish a *mounting base* at Trivandrum for a paradrop later in Sri Lanka. They boarded the aircraft with their aircrew bags well equipped to stay put in Trivandrum for several days—they carried avoidable load.

Lack of intelligence and an effort to be overly secretive with the available bits of information, led everyone to be cautious and to prepare for an overkill. A little clarity would have enabled more focussed actions.

The American Connection

The general perception is that Operation Cactus was kept under wraps until President Gayoom was rescued. As per Gen VN Sharma, the operation was a guarded secret—the Americans did not know of it being launched. The successful completion came as a surprise to the American ambassador.[38]

Mr Ronen Sen who orchestrated some aspects of the operation from 7, Race Course Road—the residence of the Indian prime minister—says that the Americans were

38. Interview with Gen VN Sharma.

consulted before the launch of Operation Cactus.[39] As per historical records maintained by the Indian Air Force, the US had offered all possible help to India. They not only knew about the operation, one of their warships was performing the Light Airborne Multipurpose System (LAMPS) in the region when INS *Betwa* went in search of the rebel ship. The captain of INS *Betwa* sought a situation report (*sitrep*) from the American counterpart. The US Navy ship gave the position of the rebel ship to the Indian frigate.[40]

This was in sharp contrast to the situation at the time of Indo-Pak War (1971) when the American 7th Fleet projected a menacing presence in the Bay of Bengal to deter India.

The Delay: An Issue!?

First, a faulty telephone line between Delhi and Agra caused delay in the orders reaching the PARA Brigade; it was a loss of precious lead-time. Then, the preparation and loading of the artillery pieces took some time. Lastly, the decision to go non-stop to Hulule entailed recalculation of the payload. Some of the equipment had to be rejected and left behind to be able to carry more fuel in the aircraft. Topping up the on-board fuel tanks did not cause additional delay; the activity ran parallel with other activities. All these issues, and more, added up to push the take-off time further away.

As a result, the first wave took off at 1800h instead of 1400h—four hours after the time committed by the COAS to the prime minister. It became a night landing rather than a day landing. Although the night landing turned out to be a boon in some ways, the delay became a contentious issue after the successful completion of the operation. The Army HQ, the VCOAS in particular, maintained that the instructions were passed to the

39. Interview with Mr Ronen Sen.
40. As per recollection of Cmde HA Gokhale.

Brigade HQ at about 0840h.[41] The brigade maintained that the first formal orders were received at about 1000h through Mathura.[42]

The logs of the telephone calls of that day were recovered from Mathura to lay the controversy to rest.

Media and Operation Cactus

The media was active during the operation and continued to report until much after it was over. News headlines, analysis and cartoons abounded. Much can be researched and said about their possible influence on the conduct of the operation, its progress and the outcome. The news channel BBC had broadcast the possibility of an Indian intervention in the Maldives well before the first wave of airlifters left Agra. People in the Maldives were tuned in to those news broadcasts. It is a foregone conclusion that the rebels, and/or their accomplices on the islands had also monitored such broadcasts but they did not take any action to deter the impending Indian onslaught. Was it because they were too busy looting and killing, and they thought that intervention would take a while? Or, they were confident of finding Gayoom before the arrival of the Indian Task Force? Was it complacency of sorts? Or may be, the news precipitated a chain of responses ending in their flight from the island? As the situation improved, the IAF aircraft flew in regional media teams to the islands on the following days to cover the operation. The international media also covered the news extensively.

Another bit of news, purportedly broadcast by the BBC, caused consternation on Malé Island. It said that 200 people had been killed in the firing between the rebels and the NSS men. It was a hoax—the actual number reported later was 19. Still later, it was reported that the rebels on board the MV *Progress Light* had

41. Sharma, n.38.
42. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim, ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1993), p. 208.

killed two hostages.[43] The Indian media reported different figures of the hostages killed. Luthufee, in his interview in November 2011, said that the PLOTE men had killed one hostage and thrown the body overboard.[44]

In its issue of November 8, 1988—five days after the coup bid—*The New York Times* reported, "… the MV *Progress Light*, which was captured by the navy commandos who parachuted on to the trapped vessel Sunday [*sic*], freed about 20 hostages and took the captors in custody."[45] This news report was inaccurate because a paradrop had not been carried out. The news of a paradrop on a ship, and rescue of hostages by paratroopers portrayed a macho image of the Indian Navy's commandos and their capabilities. A correction published later on November 12, 1988, in the Late City Final Edition of the same paper read: "A Reporter's Notebook article on Sunday about a coup attempt in the Maldives described the capture of suspects aboard a hijacked ship incorrectly. The Indian troops who captured the suspects boarded from other vessels; they did not parachute on to the ship."[46] The correction that appeared in a few lines obscured by other items of news at the end of the paper—as against the main news that that had got a full page coverage on a prominent page—did little to change that image of the Indian Navy's commandos.

43. "Eyewitness Account of 1988 Coup Attempt and Aftermath," *Dhivehi Observer Maldives News*, November 3, 2004 available at http://doreview.blogspot.in/2007/11/eyewitness-account-of-1988-coup-attempt_04.html. Accessed on October 16, 2016.
44. Shamindra Ferdinando, "Male Plot Leader Speaks out", *The Island*, November 2, 2011, available at http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=38250. Accessed on October 22, 2013.
45. Sanjoy Hazarika, "Reporter's Notebook; In Maldives, Rare Gunfire Without Joy," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1988 available at http://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/12/nyregion/c-correction…h&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%222%22%3A%22RI%3A12%22%7D. Accessed on November 23, 2014.
46. "Corrections," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1988. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/12/nyregion/c-correction…h&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%222%22%3A%22RI%3A12%22%7D. Accessed on November 23, 2014.

The TIME magazine reported India's quick response [to the crisis in the Maldives] to underscore New Delhi's growing military role in Southern Asia.[47]

Most of us participating in the operation either did not know where we were headed, or were self-sworn to secrecy about the facts. However, a lady who had come to bid good bye and wish luck to the contingent as it was leaving the cantonment in Agra, said she knew that the troops were going to the Maldives. "We have come to know from the BBC," she declared proudly.[48]

Bold Decisions: Overcoming the Ellsberg Paradox

Tools that can measure uncertainty and those that can handle it exist only in the minds. Several decisions were taken in the heat of the moment during Operation Cactus. Today, those decisions might appear to be less than perfect, may be irrational. But then, are there any *perfect* decisions?

Decisions are generally based on cognition and application of the theory of probability in different ways. An analytical look at the decisions taken during Operation Cactus must be done with the perspective of *time* (the era); and the available resources, both technological and human. A peep into the apparent irrationality will enable appreciation of how the environment was created and the options were thrown up. Needless to say, it was a complex operation with multiple forces exerting simultaneous pressures at different points. It is difficult, well nigh impossible, to gauge how exactly those pressures shaped the behaviour of the decision-makers.

From the briefing of Brig Sapatnekar to the prime minister, it was fairly clear that a paradrop could be disastrous. And, as per the intelligence available at that time, there could be 500 to 800 well armed rebels. It implied that the airlanding too was fraught

47. Ross M Munro, "Heading Them Off at the Atoll," *TIME*, November 14, 1988, p. 25.
48. Interview with Lt Col Gurinder Singh, 17 PARA Bn.

with high risk. Why then was the operation undertaken? Is it that a lucrative opportunity tempted the minds of the leadership, both political and military, to embark on a *Mission Impossible*? Gen VN Sharma says he had a hunch that the operation would succeed.[49] This reflects a profound effect of emotions on decision-making, which is often underestimated. Perhaps the question why the operation was undertaken with the odds loaded so heavily against the Task Force may never get answered with certitude.

The boldest decision had to do with the landing of the first IL-76 aircraft. There was a dilemma between the known risk and the uncertainty (ambiguity). The thought—whether or not to land when there was doubt about the control of the airfield—must have jostled the decision-makers, particularly Gp Capt Bewoor, the captain of the aircraft. They must have been faced with the Ellsberg Paradox[50]—a tendency to aim low and settle for the mediocre in the face of ambiguity. If the pilots and the PARA Brigade commander had stuck to the norms, they would have decided against landing. But they dealt with the uncertainties/ ambiguities of the moment with objectivity and took the daring decision. Again, it was Gp Capt Bewoor who took the boldest decision.

It is noteworthy that the decisions and the plans remained protean all through the operation because of doubtful intelligence.

Of Maps and Coffee Table Book

India did not have maps of the area of interest to fight the war against China in 1962. We lost that war. Did we lose the war solely because there were no maps? Not really! Want of winter clothing and rifles were other reasons for the debacle. Similarly, during the Indo-Pak War (1971), we did not have the maps of Dacca. Did the non-availability of maps prevent us from winning that war? Certainly no!

49. Interview with Gen VN Sharma.
50. The Ellsberg Paradox explains why there is a tendency to aim low and settle for the mediocre. It is named after Daniel Ellsberg, the US military analyst known for leaking the Pentagon Papers.

We succeeded in our mission in the Maldives although we did not have proper maps. Use of coffee table book and tourist magazines during Operation Cactus is talked about; and jeered at sometimes.

As per some accounts, maps were available in the Survey of India library. Perhaps no one thought of approaching them, and may be accessing them would have taken precious time, which the Task Force couldn't have afforded. But then, those were the conditions—maps (read *knowledge*) were available; accessing them was an issue.

On realising that maps were not available, the protagonists got down to overcoming the hurdle. If the aim was to find their way in a foreign land in the absence of regular military maps, they succeeded by making effective use of the coffee table book and the tourist maps. It goes to their credit that they could motivate the Indian High Commissioner, Mr AK Banerjee—a living map and encyclopaedia on the then current knowledge of the Maldives—to accompany them. It also goes to the credit of the HC that he took the bold decision to embark on the mission with the troops.

In military operations, the ends matter; the means—not as much.

Morale of the Jumpers

There was much enthusiasm among the paratroopers; even those who were not a part of the operation, wanted to find a role. For a paradrop, if it were to be undertaken, it was essential that the jumpers were qualified on the type of parachute and the aircraft to be used for the jump—the Russian D-5 parachute and the IL-76 aircraft in this case. The D-5 was a sophisticated parachute to jump with. Unlike the regularly used PTRM parachute, it required manual pulling of the ripcord to deploy the canopy, and the jump from the IL-76 aircraft entailed a special technique.

The IL-76 aircraft and the D-5 parachute system had been inducted in the mid-1980s. The conversion training of the

paratroopers from the IL-76 aircraft had been slow. Two fatal parachute accidents in two consecutive years following their induction had led to pauses in the schedule of conversion training. The accidents had had a *sobering* effect on the jumpers. Occasionally, the instructors used to discuss ways of dispelling the unspoken apprehensions in the minds of those detailed to convert and jump with the D-5 parachutes.

Not all the paratroopers involved in the operation had undergone a conversion course—technically, they were not qualified to jump. The prevailing apprehensions notwithstanding, the jumpers were eager to jump, regardless of their disqualification—Col KKK Singh was prepared to take the plunge without any past experience on the type.[51]

If that was not enough, there were some troops who had just come from the training centre and were yet to do their Para Basic Course; some others were yet to earn their *maroon berets*.[52] Some troops were sitting in an aircraft for the first time; expecting them to jump with the D-5 Parachute was asking for too much.

Recalling the morale of the men on that day, it can be said with certainty that they would have vied to face the attendant risk of jumping.

The non-availability of sufficient numbers of qualified paratroopers for jumps was not unique to Operation Cactus; there were precedents. During the Indo-Pak War (1971), the initial plan was to paradrop troops from the AN-12, Packet, Dakota and Caribou aircraft. Since a large number of men had not jumped from either the Caribou or the Dakota aircraft, courses at PTS were arranged right away. In that instance, all of 2 PARA Battalion volunteered to jump (even those who had not undergone the mandatory Para Basic Course). 2/Lt LJS Gill, who had just joined the battalion a fortnight earlier from the training academy and an Other Rank (OR) were allowed

51. Interview with Col KKK Singh (17 PARA).
52. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.

to jump without having undergone the mandatory Para Basic Course.[53]

Why Didn't the Rebels Occupy the Runway at Hulule?

Occupation and control of the runway at Hulule would have given the rebels a distinct advantage over the Indian Task Force–– timely occupation by the rebels would have spelt the nemesis of Operation Cactus. There could be numerous reasons for this. A plausible explanation could be that the rebels, after an arduous voyage, were tired, exhausted and hungry. They wanted to satiate their needs of water, food and rest. On landing at Malé, they went berserk looting the shops. It is also possible that they thought that the an intervention by Indian troops, if it were to take place as per the news broadcast by the BBC, would take some time to come through. It is possible that they thought that they would be able to capture Gayoom before the arrival of the Indian troops.

Such complacency is not uncommon in history. At the time of the accession of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, the Pathan raiders supported by the Pakistan Army were only 35 miles from Srinagar and could at any moment seize the only airport in Kashmir on which India could land troops. Instead of getting to the airfield, they indulged in looting, arson and raping the European nuns in a church.[54]

The End State: How was it Possible?

President Gayoom was back in his office, unscathed. Democratically elected representatives of the people returned, providing governance. The hostages were back home too. But for the treatment of the injured and the repair and maintenance of the damaged infrastructure, it was business as usual in the Maldives. A lot went into arriving at this end state.

53. KC Praval, *India's Paratroopers: A History of the Parachute Regiment of India* (Delhi: Vanity Books, 1993), p. 292.
54. Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins, *Freedom at Midnight* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2003), ch. 15.

There were many things that led to the failure of the nefarious designs of the rebels led by Luthufee. Likewise, there were many things that led to the success of Operation Cactus. Although there was an overlap, the causes of the failure of the rebels were not necessarily the causes of the success of the Indian Task Force and vice versa. Some simply drawn attributions for the end state are discussed in the succeeding sections.

Why did the Rebels Fail?

The rebels were a band of hired men without motivation—poorly trained, and lacking professionalism. The cause for which they came to the Maldives was not dear to them. Many of them did not know Gayoom; they wouldn't have recognised him even if they had come face to face with him.

Those men had been at sea for several days when they reached Malé. Needless to say, the boats they had used were not luxury liners, but fishing trawlers—devoid of the basic comforts and amenities essential to keep the spirits of a fighting force high. For the duration of their voyage, they had remained huddled in those fishing trawlers. That on that voyage, the food must have been rationed is a foregone conclusion. So on reaching Malé, they were utterly exhausted, thirsty and hungry. Fatigued and starved after more than four days at sea, Luthufee's men became unmindful of their leader's primary aim; they went berserk looting shops and causing a nuisance, giving time and unhindered opportunity to the Indian contingent to land at Hulule. Vasanthi, the leader of the rebels, was killed in the gun-battle with the men of the National Security Service.[55] They were, thus, devoid of effective command and control.

What Really Mattered?

Literally *headless*, the cadres did not realise the importance of the installations they had captured nor did they visualise the need for consolidating their initial gains. They did not take control of the

55. Bhardwaj, n. 36.

airfield at Hulule. They disrupted the main power supply at Malé, but did not disrupt the communications. A robust telecommunication system survived the onslaught of the rebels. Those telephone lines were used ingeniously by men loyal to Gayoom to communicate with their Indian counterparts in Delhi. In what turned out to be one of the longest overseas telephone calls, Ibrahim Zaki passed valuable information to Ronen Sen. The BBC radio's newscast stating that help for Maldives from India was on its way[56] caused consternation in the rank and file of the rebels.

The rebels knew they were poorly trained and numbered (just) 80. They also knew that the Indian troops were well-trained seasoned professional fighters. They assumed the strength of Indian troops to be high––much higher than their own (the media pegged the strength of the Indian contingent at 1,600). The ill perceived numerical superiority of the Indian contingent forced the rebels to flee. The flight of the Indian Navy's IL-38 Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) aircraft over the islands during the day demoralised the rebels and weakened their resolve further.

Why we Succeeded

Providence was on our side.

— ACM NC Suri

Most people attribute the success of Operation Cactus to the lightning action by trained professionals; leadership that gave a free hand to the field commanders; mutual respect for each other's professionalism; employment of ingenious (innovative) ways to overcome hurdles; bonhomie and jointness among the people and agencies involved; shortened channels of communication; dedicated response; realistic training and peace-time exercises… The list is long.

56. Ibid.

Fortuicous Presence of the HC

The incidental presence of the Indian High Commissioner, AK Banerjee in Delhi proved fortuitous. He was *the* source of authentic information about the Maldives. He turned out to be a ready reckoner—a moving almanac. Favourable asymmetry of numbers (both actual and perceived) and the ingenious use of the coffee table book (to substitute maps) were perhaps other contributory factors.

Mending the Stable Door in Time!

Operation Cactus brought to the fore the need for improvement in many areas. The operation succeeded to an extent because some things just worked in favour of the Indian contingent. It may not be so in the future. Among others, intelligence was an issue. After the operation, Brig Bulsara took an opportunity to address all the officers and told them not to proceed to their *pind*[57] every time they took leave; rather they must visit the neighbouring countries and gain knowledge about them; particularly the countries of India's interest. He directed the Brigade HQ to compile data on target countries.[58]

Numerous changes were brought about to improve preparedness and efficiency. Fine-tuning was done to remove the elements that had caused delays. Some of those efforts are summarised below:

- A battalion and a battery were put on four-hour notice.
- Operational load was kept ready with parachutes.
- Heavy loads were shifted to sheds in AATSS (to minimise transit time).[59]
- Man-packs containing the most essential requirements of a *jawan* were kept in readiness.
- Small arms/ ammunition were distributed and kept ready.
- Ready to eat meals were kept and recycled regularly.
- Parachutes were kept ready for a battalion group paradrop.

57. *Pind* is the Punjabi equivalent of "hometown or village".
58. Interview with Col KKK Singh.
59. This also guaranteed a certain amount of secrecy.

A conscientious effort was made to elicit suggestions; these were sought regularly from officers and men, regardless of their seniority. It became a practice to invite visitors from other units and formations; they were given a presentation on the preparedness of the brigade and were requested to suggest improvements.

There was a 500 per cent improvement in the preparedness as compared to that on November 3, 1988.[60]

60. Interview with Lt Col Gurinder Singh, Bty Cdr, 17 PARA.

11

"Chhatri Mata ki Jai!"

One Religion! One God!

When it is the question of jumping out of a perfectly well flying aircraft, there is one religion, *trust*; and there is one God, *Chhatri Mata*. When one stands in the open door of an aircraft and a blast of air hits the face, there is one prayer, "*Chhatri Mata ki Jai*!" This battle cry instils boundless courage in Indian paratroopers, enabling them not only to bail out of an aircraft in flight but also, daringly jump into situations, which most ordinary people would dread. The faith in the parachute and in the men who pack it, and the confidence in the Parachute Jump Instructors (PJIs) and the aircrew, reigns supreme. Training, qualification, currency, experience and everything else so very important otherwise, tend to be granted a berth of secondary importance.

Time and Options Running Out

On that November day in 1988 in Malé, armed rebels were on the prowl and President Gayoom was trying desperately to evade them. The hide and seek game could not have gone on for long on that small island which measures a little more than 2 km along its longest axis and a little in excess of 1 km along the shortest axis. Luthufee and his gang would be able to pin down their prey in a matter of a few hours. But for the buildings, the rebels could literally walk abreast and comb every inch of the island in less than half a

day. The odds weighed heavily against the fugitive president; it was a hopeless situation. For the Indian troops, a rendezvous with Gayoom and his loyalists, before the rebels could get him, was a race against time. The delivery of troops by sea would take as much as two to three days depending on where in the Indian Ocean they were located at the given time. By then, the game would be over, and a different government, may be one supported by Luthufee, would be in control. In that eventuality, the landing of Indian troops in the Maldives would be considered an unsolicited act, and Indian diplomats, the world over, would be struggling to explain what would be construed as an act of unprovoked aggression by India. The hope of Indian troops outwitting the rebels was pinned on minimising their travel time to Malé.

Airlift of troops alone, could save the day.

The success of Operation Cactus depended entirely on the timely arrival of troops at Hulule by air. Although, the troops were airlanded, a paradrop using the IL-76 aircraft was also considered. Some basic knowledge of *airlanding* and *paradropping* as means of aerial delivery will enable better appreciation of Operation Cactus. The following few pages are devoted to arming a reader less familiar with military airlifts, with elementary knowledge of paratrooping (mainly from the IL-76 aircraft). This might also serve as a refresher for the knowledgeable reader. This is not an endeavour to teach the readers the theory of airborne operations. Far from it—the effort is to put the uninitiated at ease and possibly make the reading interesting.

Operation Cactus: A Strategic Airlift

Simply stated, *airlift* is the transportation of men and material through the air.[1] In effect, an *airlift* delivers much more—it delivers hope, relief and succour, to name a few. Of the two important

1. "Airlift Operations: US Air Force Doctrine Document 2–6.1 dated November 13, 1999", available at http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/usaf/docs/afdd/afdd2-6-1.pdf. Accessed on August 29, 2016.

elements of war-fighting—firepower and mobility—airlift influences the latter in a predominant way. The psychological effect of a force descending from the sky (read *heaven*)—*airlanded* or *paradropped*—has always been spectacular.[2]

> Where is the prince who can afford so to cover his country with troops for its defence, so that ten thousand men descending from the clouds might not, in many places, do an infinite deal of mischief before a force could be brought together to repel them?
>
> —Benjamin Franklin (1784)

An airlift has often influenced the mind of the adversary and steered the course of many a military operation towards conclusion—Operation Cactus is one of the many examples.

The passage of the airlift platform through a hostile air space, or delivery into a territory threatened by the presence of hostile elements, places special demands on the planning and conduct of such operations. The nature of deliverables, the distance at which they are delivered, the manner of delivery and the time taken—everything matters and contributes to the outcome. Customarily, airlifts, and the aircraft that make them possible, are classified as *strategic* or *tactical*. A *strategic airlift* implies a large size of the cargo or a large number of personnel over a long distance to achieve a strategic goal.

A *tactical* or intra-theatre airlift is meant for rapid and responsive movement within an area of operation to achieve specific tactical aims. Medium lift fixed-wing aircraft with lesser payload and range, like the Packet, Dakota, Avro, Caribou and AN-32, and helicopters like the Mi-4, Mi-8, Mi-17, Chetak, Cheetah and now, the indigenous, Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH), have been used for *tactical* airlifts in the Indian context. Heli-bridging across water obstacles during the Indo-Pak War

2. The other aspects of military airlift like *freedrop*, *slithering,* etc., which are not relevant to Operation Cactus, are not discussed here.

(1971)[3] obviated the immediate need for construction of bridges across physical hazards.

This theoretical distinction between *strategic* and *tactical* airlifts has faded over the years. The DC-3 Dakota aircraft that could airlift merely three tonnes (about 25 fully equipped troops) were *tactical* airlift aircraft, as per the classical definition. But they caused a *strategic* effect when they airlifted troops in the nick of time and saved Srinagar from falling into the hands of the infiltrators (Indo-Pak War, 1947-48).

During Operation Cactus, nearly 1,600 troops, along with their arms, ammunition and vehicles, were airlifted across about 2,600 km of varied terrain. The airlift was spectacular on two counts: the numbers transported over a long distance and, more importantly, the effect. A coup was thwarted, President Gayoom was rescued and a legitimately elected government was restored.[4] It was a *strategic airlift*.[5]

Devil's Alternative

Fixed-wing aircraft are ideally suited for delivery of payloads speedily over long distances. Helicopters are suited for landing in restricted areas. Regardless of the platform used, an airlift is a costly option when compared with surface means of delivery. Scarce availability of resources, airlift platforms in particular, poses an ever-present constraint. The vulnerability of the airborne platforms, terrain and weather also discourages indiscriminate use of airlift. Yet it is the best option when surface means cannot meet dire operational necessity and *immediate-delivery-at-any-cost* becomes primal. On such occasions, the cost and effectiveness analysis tilts in favour of airlift. It is not easy to evaluate the effect of an airlift operation accurately—at least, not before, or even while, it is being

3. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, *Defence from the Skies* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2007), p. 127.
4. After the rescue, President Gayoom ruled the Maldives for two decades until another democratically elected president took over.
5. For details, see Leaflet 1.

undertaken. The uncertainty of the result of an airlift operation can render a decision debatable. In the Maldives, the security of the runway was doubtful until the aircraft landed. Although the Maldivian controllers in the ATC tower at Hulule had indicated that the runway was safe, there was a lingering fear that they could be communicating under duress. Things would have been really difficult if the fears had come true.

Security of Airlift Platform and Deception

The possibility of the adversary's retaliation renders an airlift platform vulnerable. Use of technology and tactics enables threat avoidance. In addition to self-protective measures, offensive air operations are essential for sanitisation of the *drop/ landing zones*. Consequently, control of the air, mostly with the employment of combat air power becomes a prerequisite for successful airlifts. The Mirage 2000 aircraft had stood-by to neutralise threats during Operation Cactus. And, although they did not escort the airlifters, they flew low over the islands in a show of power, the next morning. This effort went a long way in intimidating the rebels who were still hiding in the archipelago, forcing them into eventual surrender.

Reaching quickly anywhere, anytime, unheard and unseen—is a cherished military goal. Both, the aircraft and the troops, must remain *invisible* as far as possible—stealth is a desideratum. Therefore, a deception plan executed alongside a tactical plan is an integral part of an airborne operation. The two are co-terminus and flow seamlessly. Good deception can compensate, to some extent, for the lack of stealth.[6] In the small window of time available to the Indian planners, it was rather difficult to draw an elaborate deception plan. Besides, stealth was alien to the *mighty jets*.[7] True to the name, these aircraft could be seen and heard from miles away. Their massive size,

6. Stealth was a hallmark of Operation Neptune Spear (Abbottabad, 2011) that led to the killing of Osama Bin Laden.
7. 'Mighty Jets' was the epithet given to the IL-76 aircraft of 44 Squadron––they could airlift as much as 40 tonnes payload.

and the noise they made at the time of take-off/landing left little scope for stealth.

Delivery Methods

Airlanding

Airlanding is the most efficient form of delivery in a *confirmed* friendly environment. The aircraft lands and the personnel troop out—relatively fresh, and without injuries;[8] and the equipment and the supplies are offloaded. The ordnance and equipment are delivered intact. The cargo does not require special rigging and packaging. Passengers require minimal briefing/ training. Use of containers and pallets simplifies the process and lowers the downtime of the aircraft. It also permits the optimum use of the available space and the maximum allowable payload. Whereas an IL-76 aircraft can carry a maximum of 126 paratroopers (nearly 12.5 tonnes) for a para-drop sortie, it can accommodate 226 fully equipped troops (nearly 22.6 tonnes) in *double-deck* mode for airlanding.[9] The number could be greater but for the constraint of space and concern for the troops' comfort. During wars and war-like situations, personal comfort can sometimes be relegated in importance—certain exceptions can be made at the crew's professional discretion without jeopardising safety. Conscientious management of the fuel/ cargo ratio is necessary to meet operational commitments.

In Operation Cactus, the distance involved was nearly 3,000 km; there was a constraint of load that could be carried with the minimum fuel necessary to fly from Agra to Hulule, non-stop. Besides, a contingency had to be catered for—to return with full load to the nearest air base in India (Trivandrum/ Sulur), in case the runway at Hulule became unsafe due to possible occupation by the rebels. It made operational sense to carry more fuel at the

8. As against this, the paradropped troops reach their objective somewhat tired. Landing injuries, if any, can jeopardise an operation.
9. An IL-76 aircraft is designed to carry a payload of 40 tonnes.

cost of some payload—a compromise had to be struck in the larger interest of the mission. The ground party from the PARA Brigade that came to load the aircraft was ignorant of this fuel/cargo balance—they disapproved of the idea of some load being rejected (read "refused") by the aircrew.

Airlanding requires a designated runway or a Landing Zone (LZ), developed as per the local weather, terrain, altitude and the capabilities of the airlift platform. The Short Take-off and Landing/Vertical Take-off and Landing (STOL/VTOL) capability of aircraft and the ability to operate from unprepared/semi-prepared surfaces prove useful. Turnaround time between deliveries depends on the infrastructure (available at the airfield), material handling equipment and human resource. Loading/offloading with engines running and/ or while an aircraft is taxiing reduces the downtime.

Accuracy and concentration are a given; they ensure prompt *rendezvous* and easy deployment. Back loading of cargo and evacuation of personnel are bonuses. These advantages make airlanding a more preferred option than most other methods of aerial delivery.

Paradropping

Paradropping is resorted to when airlanding is not possible. Personnel, and most light and some heavy equipment can be para-dropped. This too is a fairly efficient mode of delivery but the effectiveness depends largely on the weather and terrain. *Pathfinders* are dropped some time before the *main force* to secure and mark the drop zone. Static line deployed parachutes have been used for mass drops since World War II.

While all aircraft can be used for airlanding, only some are suited for paradropping since special equipment and some modifications are required for paradropping. Two major requirements are: the position of the exit door with the possibility of opening it mid-air, and ease of lowering the ramp in flight. The

troops exiting the aircraft must not collide with the fuselage or get drawn into the engine. Likewise, the parachutes must not get entangled with any part of the aircraft during the deployment.

Aircraft speed and the number of exit points (doors) used for the paradrop determine the spread on the ground. The lesser the drop speed and the greater the number of simultaneous exit points, the greater the concentration of the troops on the ground. Single point exit was possible from the Dakota, Caribou, Otter and Avro aircraft. Two-point exit was possible from the AN-12, Packet and AN-32 aircraft. Four-point exit is possible from the IL-76 aircraft. Thus, the IL-76 aircraft could drop nearly double the number of troops that an AN-32 aircraft could over the same length of DZ in a single pass—an overwhelming advantage.

This aspect of spread on the ground becomes critical when a drop zone is restricted. In the Maldives, the drop zone was the island of Hulule with a runway surrounded by the sea on all sides. There was no room for error.

The Parachutes

Parachutes are peculiar to the type of aircraft being used for the paradrop. The versatile PTRM parachute could be used for jumps from almost all the vintage aircraft like the Dakota, Packet, Caribou, Avro and AN-32. It could not be jumped with from the AN-12 and the IL-76 aircraft.[10] The Russian D-5 parachute could be used only from the AN-32, AN-12 and IL-76 aircraft.[11]

Mass drop parachutes like the PTRM and the D-5 are not manoeuvrable. A jumper is at the mercy of the prevailing winds until he lands. Therefore, the accuracy of a paradrop depends largely on the knowledge of the actual weather, wind speed in particular. There are surface wind speed limitations for paradrops. Many an airborne exercise has been called off at the last minute due to the prevailing surface wind speeds exceeding the

10. See Leaflet 2 for more on the PTRM parachute.
11. See Leaflet 3 for more on the D-5 parachute.

permissible limits. The likely drift for a type of parachute can be calculated fairly accurately if the actual weather (wind speed) is known.[12] The actual weather on Hulule Island (wind speeds at different levels, in particular) was not known on November 3, 1988.

Airlanding v/s Paradrop

Airlanding and paradrop, both have unique advantages. A paradrop takes much less time than airlanding. It does away with the need for ground support infrastructure and personnel. A large number of aircraft can paradrop over a DZ in less time than the same number of aircraft airlanding them. Turnaround during airlanding is time consuming. Paradrop, however, mandates specialised training for the aircrew, the paratroopers and the parachute riggers.

The meaningful payload reduces considerably when troops are paradropped. A set of parachutes and weapon containers carried by a paratrooper weighs about 30 kg. This extra weight is of no use to a combatant after he lands on the ground. Thus, in an AN-32 aircraft that carries 42 fully equipped paratroopers for paradrop, the parachutes and weapon containers weigh in excess of one tonne—more than a fourth of the permissible payload. This is a compromise with the amount of ammunition and rations that a troop carries on his person. As a corollary, paradropped troops are less (read poorly) equipped for a prolonged battle and are dependent on resupply.

Elaborate planning and preparation are a must. The drop zone surface and dimensions influence the decision to paradrop. Weather plays a predominant part and necessitates alternative plans. The troops are spread over a large area and are exposed to landing injuries. Their weapons and equipment are also prone to damage. In some cases, retrieval of stores or *rendezvous* of troops can take a long time. During an airborne assault operation in World War II (Operation Husky, Sicily, 1943), the troop-carrying

12. See Leaflet 5 for calculation of drift.

aircraft (including gliders) were blown off course by strong winds. One-eighth of the combat team was dropped as planned and the remaining was scattered over some 60 miles on the island—nearly half the US troops failed to rendezvous.[13]

Limitations apart, a paradrop inspires a unique sense of awe in the mind of the adversary.

Operation Cactus: The Paradrop Dilemma

Several reasons are cited for deciding against a paradrop. According to Brig FFC Bulsara: "On November 3, we barely had 50 per cent of the number of parachutes ready that would be required for a battalion group para operation, but the air force promised to make them available well before first light next morning. How? one wondered."[14] According to Brig Sapatnekar who briefed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi, there was not enough open space to carry out a tactical paradrop of even 30 men either on the runway or anywhere around it. Secondly, the sea being all around, there were bound to be high winds, which would carry away the men into the sea, and with the load that they would be carrying, they would have no chance at all.[15]

There was, however, more to the decision against a paradrop than the mere non-availability of an adequate number of packed parachutes and the inadequacy of the drop zone. The issue of jumping with D-5 Parachute from IL-76 aircraft has been elaborated in Leaflet 3.

D-5 Parachute: Accidents and Morale

As said earlier, the D-5 main parachute (along with Z-5 reserve parachute) was inducted along with the IL-76 aircraft in the

13. E. M. Flanagan Jr., *Airborne: A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), p. 81.
14. Brig FFC Bulsara cited in Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (Lancer: New Delhi, 1993), p. 209.
15. Brig (Retd.) Vivek Sapatnekar, *Address C/O 56 APO: Location Unknown* (Copyright © Vivek Sapatnekar, 2008), pp. 164-165.

mid 1980s. Training commenced instantaneously but live jumps were planned infrequently due to various constraints including availability of the IL-76 aircraft[16] and, at times, the parachutes.[17] There was a jump accident (involving the D-5 parachute from the AN-12 aircraft) within about a year of its use. The parachute had malfunctioned and opened very close to the ground. The jumper, unsupported by the half inflated parachute, died on hitting the ground. Jump training with the D-5 parachute was suspended for a while, to establish the reasons that led to the accident and to remedy incorrect practices, if any. The technical reason for the failure could not be established conclusively.[18] The accident (the mangled body) of the paratrooper left an indelible mark on the minds of the jumpers.

The jumps commenced again after a while, albeit at an even slower (cautious) pace. Another paratrooper died in a D-5 parachute accident—this time, in a jump from the IL-76 aircraft. Jumps were suspended yet again, pending another inquiry. Again, the Court of Inquiry could not establish the reason for accident. A lay jumper began associating the two fatal accidents with the D-5 parachute—given a choice, the jumper wanted to jump with the PTRM parachute rather than the D-5. It was a natural response to the two fatal D-5 parachute accidents. It took some effort on the part of the PJIs to allay the anxiety of the trainees and proceed with the routine training. The pauses in training for various reasons had resulted in a very few jumpers being converted on to D-5 parachutes/ IL-76 aircraft.

No Room for Bravado

A paratrooper seldom refuses an opportunity to jump—never in

16. The IL-76 fleet was heavily tasked with routine couriers to the east and airlifting men and cargo in support of the IPKF in Sri Lanka.
17. There were issues with ready availability of special twines for packing the parachute and the KAP-3P Automatic Activation Device (AAD).
18. The author was a member of the Court of Inquiry looking into the cause of the fatal parachute accident.

the face of danger. Whether trained or not, troops were ready to jump with the D-5 parachute in Operation Cactus. Lt Col KKK Singh,[19] commanding officer, 17 PARA Regt said that he had not converted on to the D-5 parachute and had not jumped from the IL-76 aircraft until after Operation Cactus, but was ready to jump, if the situation demanded.[20] There were other paratroopers who would have volunteered to take the risk.

As stated earlier (in the chapter title *Anatomy of Cactus*), during the Indo-Pak War (Tangail, 1971) all of 2 PARA Bn had volunteered to jump—even those who had not undergone the Para Basic Course. 2/Lt LJS Gill and an OR were allowed to jump without having undergone formal training.[21] But, that was the PTRM parachute and there were only two jumpers. They were fitted with parachutes and were made to jump along with other men. Injury at the time of landing was a matter of calculated risk. Had they hesitated, they would have been *helped* out of the aircraft by the dispatchers. A small delay (if any) due to hesitation at the time of exit would not have jeopardised the operation. It was relatively safe since there was no water body of consequence around the drop zone.

In the case of Operation Cactus, hesitation by a less trained/ untrained jumper in the *stick* at the time of exit would have delayed the jumpers behind him, resulting in more spread on the ground. On Hulule Island, a larger spread would have meant jumpers landing in the sea. A large number of untrained men in the *stick* would have increased the risk. In 1971 too, there were paratroopers who had not jumped from the Caribou/ Dakota aircraft. In that instance, courses were arranged for such paratroopers to jump from these aircraft.[22] The effort was worthwhile because there

19. Lt Col KKK Singh was an army paratrooper and aviator who had jumped over Tangail in the Indo-Pak War (1971).
20. Interview with Col KKK Singh.
21. K.C. Praval, *India's Paratroopers: A History of the Parachute Regiment of India* (Delhi: Vanity Books, 1993), p. 292.
22. Ibid.

was enough time and the conversion involved only a different aircraft—the parachute used was the same. Such abridged just-in-time training would not have been possible in the case of Operation Cactus due to paucity of time and because the conversion involved two major switchovers—a new parachute, which entailed manual opening; and a new aircraft, which was very different from the aircraft already in use for paratrooping training.

Availability of Packed Parachutes

It is a fact that only a limited stock of parachutes was available in the packed state, ready for the jump. These were the parachutes kept as war reserve. It is also a fact that with about 200 qualified Safety Equipment Workers (SEWs)[23] in No. 4 Wing Air Force and another 200 in the Paratroopers Training School (PTS), the Chief Engineering Officer (C Eng O) in Agra would have been able to manage the requisite numbers.[24] That should have resolved the issue of numbers. Not Really!

As on November 3, 1988, only sixty five KAP 3P Automatic Activation Devices (AADs) were available for immediate use with the D-5 parachutes. Since jump training with the D-5 parachute was progressing at a slow pace, the AADs had been removed from these parachutes and fitted on to the High Altitude Parachute Penetration Systems (HAPPS) to give impetus to combat freefall training. It was a deliberate decision to divert the instruments from the D-5 Parachute Bay to the HAPPS Bay. With regular use over a period of time, some of the AADs had become unserviceable and some others had outlived their lives. Recalling the functional instruments would not have made a significant difference in the availability of parachutes.

Therefore, on that fateful day, the brigade had to contend with only sixty five D-5 parachutes—more packed parachutes

23. SEWs were responsible for packing/ rigging the parachutes for live jumps.
24. I was the officer in charge of the Safety Equipment Section of PTS with 200 SEWs under my command.

could be made available but they would be useless without the AADs.

Summary of Reasons Against Jumps with D-5 Parachutes
Several factors contributed to the decision against a mass paradrop with the D-5 parachute from the IL-76 aircraft:

- Small size of the Drop Zone (DZ).
- Proximity of the DZ to the sea.
- Wind/ weather conditions.
- Limitations of the D-5 parachute with regards to:
  - Water-landing drills.
  - Ability to jump with standard weapons/ equipment.
- Inadequate number of parachutes:
  - For want of AADs.
  - Being in an unpacked state.
- Non-availability of adequate number of qualified jumpers.

Notwithstanding the above (and notwithstanding the decision against a paradrop), a contingency plan had been made to cater to a situation arising out of the inability (for any unforeseen reason) of the first wave to airland the troops. There was a plan to paradrop Maj Dhillon alone over the airfield and, subject to his landing on the island and finding it safe for airlanding, he would advise the formation to land.

High Altitude High Opening (HAHO): A Possible Alternative?!
Much has been said about the non-feasibility of the jump using the D-5 parachutes from the IL-76 aircraft. In those extreme circumstances, was there an alternative to the D-5 parachutes? Perhaps "YES!" Pathfinders jumping with the HAPPS could have landed on the airfield and secured it for the main force (to be airlanded). But that could have been possible only in daylight hours, as the night jump capability with the HAPPS had not been acquired. This section deals with the possibility of a jump with the HAPPS.

The HAHO jump technique offers the best and most stealthy way to infiltrate a target.[25] It is one of the best ways of reaching a target clandestinely from a standoff distance so that the delivery platform goes *unseen* and the element of surprise is maintained till the last minute. A battle-ready jumper bails out of an aircraft at a high altitude (say about 20,000 ft) and deploys the parachute immediately after exiting the aircraft. He takes advantage of the prevailing winds to manoeuvre his parachute to achieve an accurate landing in a small and restricted area. The aerofoil-shaped parachute (called the ram air parachute) used for HAHO jumps is highly manoeuvrable and can enable precise landings.

The HAPPS, complete with main and reserve parachutes, oxygen bottles with breathing masks, and other paraphernalia had been procured in the early 1980s. The system used ram air parachutes. In favourable wind and visibility conditions, it was capable of delivery at standoff distances of 40 to 50 km (from a height of 20,000 ft). Training had commenced and the jumpers had learnt the technique of flying and manoeuvring the parachute to land accurately on targets as small as a tennis court from a standoff distance of about 8 to 10 km.

Further jump training—from higher altitudes and night jump training—was hamstrung for several reasons. There was an issue with the servicing of the oxygen bottles (and their certification). It prevented jumps from heights above 12,000 ft AGL in Agra. Night jumps and high altitude jumps were not undertaken for want of special equipment and clothing, the cylume stick[26] in particular.

A major handicap was the non-availability of an adequate number of AADs for the main parachutes. To let the training continue somehow, without interruption, KAP 3P, the Russian

25. Mark Owen, *No Easy Day* (London: Penguin Books, 2 012), p. 85.
26. *Cylume Sticks* were flexible plastic sticks filled with chemicals. On activation during night jumps, they used to illuminate the *altimeter*, *compass* and other instruments used by the jumper.

AAD fitted on the D-5 parachute was cannibalised[27] and used with the HAPPS.

Even if everything else had worked out as per the plan, the issues of mustering sufficient numbers of qualified combat free fallers and getting to know the actual wind pattern up to 20,000 ft AGL, would have stymied the effort to paradrop troops.

Challenging Times

Military leaders in the field are sometimes faced with a difficult situation in which they are required to choose from among numerous alternatives the outcome of each of which appears to be disastrous to begin with. Operation Cactus was one such case: the leaders at the functional level had to choose between 'landing on a runway whose security was in doubt' and 'paradropping in the face of high casualties' It goes to the credit of the officers involved that in those nerve-racking moments they weighed and considered their options patiently and took a decision that paid off.

27. *Cannibalisation* is a term used in the IAF for removing an item of equipment from a major assembly to give a lease of life to another. Thus, the HAPPS were put to use by taking away the AADs from the D-5 parachutes.

12

Some Parallels

A touch of Otto Skorzeny and Entebbe. Good Show!

— Lt Col "Baboo" Sapru[1]

Military history is replete with examples of operations, which have tested the will and ingenuity of warriors to overcome odds. For long, Operation Eiche[2] (Italy, 1943) and Operation Thunderbolt[3] (Entebbe, 1976) have stood out as textbook examples of perfection in the conduct of military operations in the face of uncertainty and high stakes. Sometimes willingly, sometimes grudgingly, Operation Cactus has been compared with these two of the most daring operations of all times. What follows is a comparison of striking aspects of these three operations with a view to bringing out some of the similarities and differences. First, a word about Operation Eiche and Operation Thunderbolt.

Operation Eiche (Italy, September 1943)

May I suggest, sir, that we forget all about figures and trying to compute our chances; we both know that they are very small, but we also know that, however small, we shall stake our lives on success!

— Capt Karl Radl to his team leader (Capt Otto Skorzeny)[4]

1. About Operation Cactus, cited by Brig Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (Lancer: New Delhi, 1993), pp. 234-235.
2. This operation is also called "Operation Oak" outside Germany.
3. Popularly known as the Entebbe Raid.
4. Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Special Missions: The Memoirs of Hitler's Most Daring Commando* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2011 Kindle Version), loc 1292.

At the height of the Second World War, Italy suffered defeats in North Africa and Greece. The Italians despised those setbacks to such an extent that King Victor Emmanuel dismissed the country's military leader, Benito Mussolini, and put him under arrest. Since Mussolini still enjoyed support from some quarters, his arrest was kept secret and he was moved occasionally to new and different locations to prevent a possible attempt to free him.

Mussolini was important in Hitler's scheme of things. For Hitler, his absence meant Italy eventually falling into the hands of the Allies. Therefore, it was essential for the Germans to find Mussolini and to restore him at the helm in Italy. The Germans tried to extricate him from a naval fortress on the Italian island of Santa Maddalena in the Mediterranean. The plan had to be aborted in the final stages because Mussolini had been moved to a new location.

Later, Operation Eiche was launched to evacuate the deposed dictator from the Albergo Campo Imperatore Hotel atop the Gran Sasso mountain. In a daring raid, gliderborne German troops landed in the vicinity of the hotel and evacuated Mussolini.

Operation Thunderbolt (Entebbe, July 1976)

> *There were no perfect answers to a problem set by madmen. There were only choices. And each choice invited disaster. Thunderbolt will either be a spectacular success or a terrible catastrophe for Israel.*
>
> — Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister of Israel (1976)[5]

Air France Flight 139 which originated in Tel Aviv with 246 passengers on board—a third of whom were Israelis—was hijacked by four terrorists after take-off from Athens on Sunday, June 27, 1976. After a halt at Benghazi, the terrorists took the aircraft to Entebbe (Uganda). Three more terrorists joined them. They demanded the release of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons on charges of terrorism in return for the hostages. They

5. William Stevenson, *90 Minutes at Entebbe* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 56.

threatened to kill the hostages if the demands were not met by the deadline of 1400h (Israeli time) on July 1,1976. On the third day, the hostages were split into two groups: Israelis and non-Israelis. The non-Israeli group was released; and the Israeli group was held back. The terrorists reiterated the demand for the release of their brethren held in Israeli prisons, including of Kozo Okamoto[6] and a number of other Arab and German terrorists imprisoned in other countries, in return for the remaining hostages who included the 12-member Air France crew who had stayed back in solidarity with their Israeli passengers. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin[7] received the information about the hijack on the same day at 1330h; and by 1530 h, a crisis management team had been formed.

Israel regards the barter of the innocents for criminals as immoral. For that reason, the Israeli passengers on the flight had to be treated as if they were "soldiers in the front line."[8] But under those extreme circumstances, the Israeli Cabinet, fully supported by the opposition, took a unanimous decision to accede to the demands of the terrorists.[9] The decision was made public.[10] In the meantime, the terrorists extended the deadline until after Sunday, July 4, 1976. This extension was given, because Idi Amin, the Ugandan president—who was supporting the cause of the terrorists covertly—was away in Mauritius. This gave the Israelis time to reconsider a military option.

To launch a rescue operation at Entebbe, nearly 3,500 km away from Israel, where the environment was hostile, was a daunting task. Despite slim chances of success, the Israelis succeeded. All the passengers held in the old terminal building of Entebbe

6. A Japanese enlisted by the PLO, who killed 24 people at Lod airport in 1972.
7. A retired general and a former chief of Israel's Military Staff.
8. Stevenson, n.5, p. x.
9. Iddo Netanyahu, *Yoni's Last Battle: The Rescue at Entebbe, 1976* (Gefen Books: New York, 2001 Kindle Version), loc. 483-486.
10. It cannot be said with certainty whether this was a genuine decision, or a ploy to buy time.

airport were freed on July 4, 1976, after a week of a tempestuous operation.

The farthest in range, the shortest in time, and the boldest in imagination, Operation Thunderbolt was a turning point in the civilised world's response to acts of terror.

Looking for Parallels: Three Rescue Operations, Each with a Difference

All three of these operations entailed *rescue*. In two cases—Operation Eiche and Operation Cactus—a leader had to be found and rescued. Thereafter, while Mussolini had to be evacuated to a safe haven, Gayoom had to be provided protection in his own country. In the case of Operation Thunderbolt, the hostages had to be rescued from the terrorists and airlifted from Entebbe (in Uganda) to Israel. Operation Cactus required positioning of the task force on an island nearly 2,600 km away. The scenes of action for Operation Eiche (about 100 km away from the mounting base) and Operation Thunderbolt (about 3,500 km away) were, strictly speaking, not islands. But then, the delivery of the task force in each case, had to be in an area surrounded by hostile elements–on *islands* of sorts. Even the passage for the Israelis—between Egypt and Saudi Arabia—was through hostile territory.

The Israelis risked their elite troops to rescue their own people, while the Germans and the Indians undertook the operations to rescue a leader of a foreign country as a follow-up of a decision of their country's leadership.

The Decision and the Government's Backing

Mussolini's rescue was critical to Hitler's designs in Europe. The German dictator did not consult his general staff or ministers before deciding to send a force to rescue Mussolini. He just gave an executive order to rescue the Italian dictator. He chose the team leader, Otto Skorzeny, personally and left the decision-making, planning and execution to him and some other experts. He told

Skorzeny that he would dissociate himself from the enterprise if it failed and would possibly disavow his (Skorzeny's) action publicly, saying that it was an insane plan concocted by the officer along with the local commanders and acted upon without authority. He expected Skorzeny to be prepared to be thrown over for the sake of Germany.[11]

Operation Thunderbolt was an Israeli action in accordance with their policy of not succumbing to the demands of terrorists. Although the decision was arrived at after a prolonged debate within the Cabinet and was supported by the opposition, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had assumed full responsibility for the outcome before giving a "go ahead!" He had told his Cabinet that the government would have to resign if the operation failed.[12]

In the case of Operation Cactus, the idea of sending the National Security Guard (NSG) to rescue President Gayoom was given the go-by in the early stages of decision-making. Since it was a request (read SOS) from the head of the state of a friendly country, Operation Cactus had to be an overt operation with the full support of the Indian government. The prime minister, with inputs from the diplomatic staff, determined the necessity of undertaking the operation. The inputs from the COAS and the VCAS assured him of its feasibility. Once the decision to go ahead was taken, the planning and execution were left to the field commanders.

The Odds and the Probability of Success

Two aspects of these three operations stand out: first, the high risk and the uncertainty at the time of launching; and second, the spectacular outcome in each case. Given the circumstances, the *pundits* would have rated the probability of success as close to zero.

In the case of Operation Eiche, Mussolini was kept under house arrest in Hotel Campo Imperatore atop Mount Sasso in

11. Skorzeny, n. 4, loc. 1072-1704.
12. Netanyahu, n. 9, loc. 2584-2593.

Italy. Armed Italians numbering nearly 250 guarded the building. The Germans landed in gliders in the vicinity of the hotel and raided the complex. A small mistake on their part could have led to the frisking away, or, in an extreme situation, the killing, of Mussolini. In Operation Thunderbolt, the 104 hostages were held at gunpoint in the old terminal building of Entebbe airport. Any wrong action by the Israeli raiding team would have resulted in carnage—it would have led to the killing of all the hostages. Operation Cactus was no different—President Gayoom was hiding on Malé Island, which measured one km by two km (approx.). Had the rebels carried out an organised search after they landed on the island, they would have found him. It was a challenge for the Indian troops to reach Gayoom before the rebels could find him.

In all the three cases, the assault teams—and the aircraft that delivered them—were extremely vulnerable at the time of landing. Foresight and prompt action on the part of the opposing forces would have turned the tables in favour of the Italians (in the case of Operation Eiche) and in favour of the terrorists/ rebels in the case of Operation Thunderbolt and Operation Cactus respectively.

Method of Delivery and Anticipated Casualties

Time was of the essence in each case. Use of the fastest means of delivery was a primary requirement. Therefore, use of surface means to position the task force was out of the question. Delivery of the force to the scene of action by air was the only choice, rather axiomatic. In all the three cases, the skills and daring of the pilots mattered, for on their ability to deliver precisely, depended the rest of the operation.

Considering that the troops had to be delivered in a hostile environment, the landing of the aircraft was a risky proposition. Therefore, in each case, paradrop was thought of as an option. But the idea was given up after some deliberations. In the case of

Operation Eiche, it was given up due to the small size of the *drop zone* atop Mount Gran Sasso. Accuracy of a paradrop would have been an issue. Then there was the issue of the rate of descent of the parachutes. In the rarefied air at that altitude (6,300 ft above mean sea level), the rate of descent of the parachutes would have been high, causing landing injuries.[13] Even with the use of gliders—at that altitude without a prepared landing surface—they had feared the losses to be close to a staggering 80 per cent.[14]

Recordings of the inquiry into the Entebbe Raid, released by the Israeli Defence Ministry on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the operation, suggest that one of the plans considered by the Israelis was parachuting a force onto Entebbe airport and rescuing the hostages after a fight. This was rejected outright because a paradrop on the airport would draw the attention of the terrorists and endanger the lives of the hostages. Another paradrop option over Lake Victoria (in the proximity of Entebbe airport) entailed the use of rubber dinghies. The option to paradrop was discarded since the lake was infested with crocodiles.[15] Besides, one of the rubber dinghies paradropped over the Mediterranean Sea during the trial runs, burst on impact.[16] As per simulation, the Israelis had estimated that 20 hostages could die. But if secrecy was lost, may be all the hostages and all of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) men would be killed.[17]

In case of Operation Cactus too, paradrop was given considerable weightage during the planning stage. It was rejected mainly due to the small size of the likely drop zone (Hulule airport) and its proximity to the sea. There was an apprehension that a large

13. William H McRaven, *Spec Ops–Case Studies in Special Operations: Theory and Practice* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 178.
14. Skorzeny, n. 4, loc. 1277.
15. Gili Cohen, "How the Entebbe Raid Could Have Unfolded: Declassified Recordings Reveal Alternative Plans," *Israel News*, July 03, 2016, available at http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.728666 Page. Accessed on May 1, 2017.
16. McRaven, n.13, p. 336.
17. Netanyahu, n. 9, loc. 2584-2593.

number of troops could drift away because of the prevailing winds, and land in the water. The paratroopers using the D-5 parachutes[18] were handicapped: they could not carry their usual rifles [7.62 mm SLRs (Self-Loading Rifles)] and would not be able to discard the parachutes expeditiously if they landed in water. Looking at the aerial photograph of the airfield in a coffee table book, Brig Bulsara had assessed the chances of survival of the paratroopers (in the case of a paradrop) at seven out of ten.[19] Brig Vivek Sapatnekar too, had estimated that a high percentage would land in the water. In his briefing to the prime minister, he had said:

> There is not enough open space to carry out a tactical paradrop of even thirty men either on the runway or anywhere around it. Secondly, the sea being all around, there are bound to be high winds, these will certainly carry away the men into the sea and with the load that they would be carrying, more than 60 kilograms, they will have no chance at all. They will drown. … The best option would be to capture the airfield by a *coup de main* landing on the runway itself by the paratroopers, reinforced by para commandos, and capture the airport by night.[20]

In all the three cases, paratroopers, rather than regular infantry troops were assigned the task (although a paradrop was not resorted to). A distinct advantage of deploying airborne troops is that unlike regular infantry troops, who can, at best, be *airlanded*, the paratroopers provide an additional delivery option of being paradropped. Besides, in some ways, a paratrooper epitomises an ideal warrior—one determined to achieve the aim at *any* cost.[21]

18. The D-5 parachute was the only parachute that could be jumped with from the IL-76 aircraft.
19. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi: Lancers, 1993), p. 212.
20. Brig Vivek Sapatnekar (Retd), *Address C/O 56 APO: Location Unknown* (Copyright © Vivek Sapatnekar, 2008), pp. 164-165.
21. In the case of Operation Neptune Spear (Killing of Osama Bin Laden–Abottabad, 2011) also, Team Six were qualified paratroopers.

Command and Control

Initially, the Führer Headquarters (FHQ) gave *executive orders* for a parachute assault on the island of Santa Maddalena to rescue Mussolini. But when Capt Skorzeny addressed Hitler and his top brass on the situation, Hitler withdrew his order and valued the junior officer's suggestions for an alternate plan.[22] All through, the German team was under the command and control of their leader, Otto Skorzeny.

The Israelis had maintained an airborne Command Post in a Boeing 707 throughout the operation. Among others on board to facilitate the mission were Maj Gen Yekutiel Adam, the Operations Branch chief, and Maj Gen Benny Peled, the air force commander.[23] The presence of the airborne Command Post relieved the task force of some of the nagging worries. The airborne Command Post processed real-time intelligence and facilitated the refuelling of the aircraft on the return leg.

In the case of Operation Cactus, the Indian prime minister took the decision to launch the military operation to rescue Gayoom. The military HQ tasked the lower formations and left the execution to them. A free hand was given to the field formations to plan and execute the operation. There was no interference from the *higher ups*, except that there were frequent calls to update the status until the aircraft formation took off from Agra. Brig Bulsara and the duo of Gp Capt Bewoor and Gp Capt Goel were in absolute command.

Team Building

The Germans did not have a team earmarked and ready to undertake such operations. Hitler personally chose Capt Otto Skorzeny out of half a dozen shortlisted officers to lead in Operation Eiche. He chose him because, beyond proving his military prowess like the

22. Skorzeny, n. 4, loc. 1052-1063.
23. Netanyahu, n. 9, loc. 2356.

others, he had travelled across Italy on a motorcycle[24] and knew the country and its terrain better than the others.

The Israelis had been dealing with the menace of terrorism. They had contingency plans and an organisational structure for the rescue of hostages from Lod airport but a rescue from Entebbe was *different*. *The* Sayeret Matkal Counter Terrorist Unit (popularly known as the Unit)—trained and designated to undertake anti-terrorist raids—was tasked to rescue the hostages. The Israeli leadership depended on the military commanders at the functional level to choose their teams. The local commanders, in turn, made use of the resources at their disposal to get the best people on board; age and background (civilian or military) were of less consequence. They mustered all the men—serving and/ or reservists—to meet their operational requirements.

In 1988, India did not have an earmarked team/ force to undertake missions like Operation Cactus. The leadership in the case of Operation Cactus was incidental (almost). Brig FFC Bulsara, being the brigade commander, 50 (I) PARA Brigade, was at the helm. He preferred 6 PARA although on the fateful day, the battalion had only a skeleton strength in Agra—its men were scattered all over. Perhaps he had more confidence in Col SC Joshi (6 PARA) than the others. In an interview with the author, Col KL Sharma[25] grudged this preference of the brigade commander; he felt that 3 PARA deserved to lead in Operation Cactus. Gp Capt AG Bewoor was the captain of the lead aircraft, and since he was the commanding officer of the only IL-76 squadron of the IAF participating in the operation, he was the natural leader of the formation. Gp Capt AK Goel had been sent from Air HQ to brief the aircrew, but considering that the officer was an experienced IL-76 pilot and had commanded the IL-76 squadron before Gp Capt Bewoor took charge, Air HQ authorised him to fly—the Operations Branch valued his *go-getter* approach in all situations.

24. McRaven, n. 13, p. 170.
25. Col KL Sharma, was the commanding officer of 3 PARA Bn.

Interestingly, some level of spoken Italian was a criterion for the selection of the German troops in Operation Eiche. However, that knowledge of the language was not put to use. The Israelis gave weightage to appearance—they dressed like the Ugandan soldiers and even drove in a limousine like that of Idi Amin. There was no criterion of fluency of language for the Indian contingent. It was incidental that Capt (IN) Gopalachari's knowledge of the Tamil language (the mother tongue of the rebels) came in handy while trying to reason with the rebels on the high seas. Many an expert negotiator will affirm that being spoken to in the mother tongue does dilute the resolve of a terrorist. That it did in this instance is a foregone conclusion.

Knowledge of the Area of Operation

First-hand knowledge of the area of operation is a bonus, particularly when there is a dearth of reliable intelligence. Skorzeny had several days to gather intelligence for Operation Eiche. He flew over the target before the operation and took aerial photographs of the proposed landing zone. He also sent a doctor to gather information about the presence of Mussolini atop Mount Sasso.

The Israelis too had information about Entebbe airport through individuals who had worked in Uganda. Muki Betser, who had served for a short time in Uganda in an Israeli military mission, remembered the layout of the old airport building. The hostages released by the terrorists comprised a reliable source of information on the situation as it developed. Mossad agents flew over Entebbe a day before the operation and provided pictures of the airport, which were handed over to the team.[26] The task force continued getting intelligence inputs until the last minute before they took off from Sharm al-Sheikh. Later, during the operation, the airborne Command Post continued receiving inputs.

In the case of Operation Cactus, Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian high commissioner, who was in India at that time, had first-hand

26. Netanyahu, n. 9, loc. 2396.

knowledge of the islands. He (as a civilian) accompanied the Indian Task Force for the operation. A telephone line, which was kept alive cleverly through the operation, was used to receive information—particularly on the availability of the runway.

Although Indian troops had operated in the Maldives during World War II and India had provided assistance in building the runway at Hulule, records were not readily available to clear the doubts of decision-makers and planners.

Time at Hand: Affordability of a Rehearsal

The Germans had time on their side – although Mussolini had to be found and evacuated, his life was not under immediate threat. For four weeks, Skorzeny and his men followed each bit of information and rumour to locate Mussolini. The Germans even consulted clairvoyants and astrologers in Berlin in the hope of learning about Mussolini's whereabouts.[27] Skorzeny flew over the area of interest and clicked pictures to overcome the inadequacy of maps. An abortive attempt was also made to evacuate Mussolini from the island of Santa Maddalena. They had time to gather more intelligence and plan another operation. The flying time from Patrica di Mare airport—from where the German gliders got airborne—to Gran Sasso was just about one hour.

The French airliner was hijacked on June 27, 1976. With the initial deadline given by the terrorists fast approaching, the Israeli Cabinet had decided to accede to the demands. But when the deadline got extended, they had a breather in which they evaluated military options and tried out and rehearsed the raid. They paradropped rubber dinghies (to simulate the paradrop over Lake Victoria) and practised night *short take-off and landing* without landing lights on an unlit runway. They also rehearsed raids on the mock-up of the old airport building they were going to raid at Entebbe. They managed to get a limousine and got it painted like the Ugandan dictator's staff car to work up a

27. Skorzeny, n. 4, loc. 989.

deception plan. The drivers of the land rovers and the limousine practised off-loading their vehicles from the Hercules aircraft. They made the best of the lease of about five days that came their way. For the Israelis, it was an 8-hour flight to Entebbe.

The timeline for Operation Cactus was much shorter. The Indian contingent could not afford to undertake elaborate planning. The first feelers of an impending requirement of a major airlift reached the functional levels in the air force at 0715h in the morning of November 3, 1988.[28] The PARA Brigade received similar inputs at about 1000h.[29] The executive orders were given by mid-day. The IL-38, the Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) aircraft of the Indian Navy, flew over the islands during the day on November 3, 1988. That reconnaissance was of little help to the Indian Army/ Air Force. There was just enough time (about six hours) to muster airlift resources and the task force, and get airborne.[30] There was little scope for elaborate planning and preparation as per the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). For want of time, a rehearsal was out of the question. It was a 4-hour flight from Agra to Hulule. The major part of the briefing to the company commanders and the troops was done during the flight. Even the distribution of ammunition—an activity that was otherwise against flight safety norms—was done on board the aircraft since there was no other option.[31] To top it all, the second-in-command of the ground force was nominated by the PARA Brigade Commander (Bde Cdr) in flight. Lt Col KKK Singh (17 PARA) who was seated in the second aircraft could not be briefed at all on his role (as the second-in-command) by the Bde Cdr.

28. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, "Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives," *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2014, p. 150.
29. Brig FFC Bulsara in Karim ed., n. 1, p. 208.
30. The first wave of IL-76 aircraft was airborne at 1800h.
31. Bewoor, n. 28, p. 154.

Enthusiasm

The men did not want to be left behind. Capt Karl Radl who was tasked by Skorzeny to muster a team, reported unrest in their unit. The men were rebellious; everyone wanted to be in the team.[32] The Israelis faced a similar dilemma. At first, reservists, including pilots were called up to be part of the team. Then there was a tussle for being on the team; none of those called/ recalled, wanted to be left behind.

In the case of Operation Cactus, young officers undergoing a cadre in the Army Air Transport Support School (AATSS) left their classes and rushed to their units when they came to know that something was brewing. Some of them rode bicycles to get there at the earliest.[33] Even those who were not trained and qualified to jump from the IL-76 aircraft, were keen and volunteered to jump.[34]

Secrecy

Hitler had warned Skorzeny to maintain absolute secrecy–only five people were to know about the operation.[35] Heinrich Himmler[36] reprimanded Skorzeny when the latter tried to take notes during a briefing. Skorzeny, on his part, did not share all the available information with his men until they were airborne. To the pilots who flew to reconnoitre the hotel atop Gran Sasso, he declared that the aim of the mission was to clandestinely photograph the ports on the Adriatic Sea. To mislead the Italians, he directed the reconnaissance pilot to fly over some peaks other than those of his interest.

The Israelis took every step, small and big, to maintain secrecy. The five Hercules aircraft (including one reserve) that were to take part in the operation took off in different directions from Lod airport and landed at Sharm al-Sheikh, the mounting base. They maintained Radio Telephony (RT) silence to avoid being

32. McRaven, n. 13, p. 172.
33. Interview with Brig GP Singh (3 PARA)
34. Interview with Col KKK Singh (17 PARA).
35. McRaven, n. 13, p. 171.
36. Heinrich Himmler was the head of the Gestapo and Waffen SS.

overheard by the Soviet surveillance team in the proximity of the Israeli coast.[37] The troops who took part in the operation changed into their battle fatigues only after reaching the mounting base.[38]

It would not be incorrect to say that secrecy was incidental in the case of Operation Cactus. There was less scope for a security leak for several obvious reasons. First, very little intelligence was available and there was very little time between the "go ahead!" and the execution to share any information. Second, the plans were being firmed up until quite close to the take-off time. Many who took part in the operation came to know of the plan and the destination only after the aircraft took off. For a long time after the formation took off, the PJIs were under the impression that it was an operation in support of the IPKF in Sri Lanka and that Sulur or Trivandrum in the south would be the mounting base. Television news about the attempted coup in the Maldives led to conjectures that India had launched a rescue operation. By the time the second wave got airborne, the ladies in the units had concluded that their husbands were possibly heading for the Maldives.[39] That the rebels did not pay heed to such news was incidental.

Numerical Asymmetry

The Germans numbered 108 when they embarked on the mission. Two of their gliders abandoned take-off due to craters in the runway, depleting their strength by 22. A glider crashed into the mountainside at the time of landing, killing most of its occupants. Thus, they numbered about 80 when they finally landed. On landing, they did not wait to rendezvous—lest the surprise be lost—and proceeded to the lobby of the hotel. The numerical superiority of the Italians who numbered close to 250 was rendered meaningless because of Gen Soleti accompanying the German squad—the Italians staggered at

37. Netanyahu, n. 9, loc. 2432.
38. Ibid., loc. 2610.
39. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

the sight of their own general literally marching at the head of a group of German paratroopers. Soon, more German troops arrived by surface means and outnumbered the Italians at the hotel.

The Israeli team numbered nearly 200, including a medical team of 20 and a refuelling crew of 10. The actual strength of the Red Force—the terrorists and the Ugandans supporting them—is not clearly known. Four hijackers had hijacked the French airliner; three or four more had joined them at Entebbe. The airport terminal was guarded by 60 to 100 armed Ugandans and an estimated 1,000 Ugandan troops were stationed in a military base adjoining the airport. Pure numbers on either side do not explain the numerical asymmetry in this case because the Ugandans were scattered. Besides, the killing of four hijackers within minutes of the landing of the Israelis rendered the numerical asymmetry even more meaningless.

The Indian contingent outnumbered the rebels by 4:1 (approx.) when the first wave landed. In the dark of the night, the rebels who numbered 80, miscalculated the strength of the Indian contingent to be much higher—close to 1,600 as per some accounts. So the numerical asymmetry as perceived by the rebels turned out to be 20:1 against them. This had a demoralising effect on the rebels and contributed to their hasty retreat.[40]

The Role of the Navy

Operation Eiche ended with the rescue of Mussolini and safe take-off of the aircraft carrying the Italian dictator. Likewise, the lift off of the Hercules aircraft with the rescued hostages on board marked the end of Operation Thunderbolt. The navies of Germany and Israel had no role in the conduct of those operations. The Indian Navy too did not have a specific role in Operation Cactus, when the decision was taken in Delhi. INS *Betwa* was launched in anticipation. The captain of the frigate got the bare essential briefing when the

40. The asymmetry of numbers has been discussed at length in the chapter titled "Anatomy of Cactus".

frigate was launched from Cochin. He was told that there had been a coup in Malé and that the Indian naval presence in the area was essential.

The operation would have ended with the rescue of President Gayoom but the rebels fleeing in a hijacked merchant vessel with the hostages on board generated a significant role for the Indian Navy. It was a matter of chance that INS *Godavari,* returning from an exercise in Australia, also joined the fray. INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa* chased the rebel ship and coerced the rebels into surrendering.

Going for Overkill

The adversary's actual strength and capability in each case were not fully known. Therefore, the Germans went well prepared—they carried two machine guns per nine men and Tommy guns for the rest of the paratroopers. They also carried grenades, tracers, rocket launchers, detonators, plastic explosive (65 lb), civilian clothing, radio sets, medical aid and rations for three days.

The Israelis were well armed with silenced pistols, machine guns and shoulder-fired rocket-propelled grenades. They had two land rovers and four Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) for mobility and a limousine for deception. To cater to the need for refuelling, they had carried a special pump and a refuelling team of ten men. Anticipating heavy casualties, they had a full-fledged medical team on board.

In the Maldives, the use of words like Tamil, Sri Lanka, LTTE and PLOTE, etc. created a perception about the capabilities of the enemy. From the available inputs, it was construed that the adversary would be heavily armed. When the first wave was airborne, the Indian perception about the enemy was that they were armed with rocket launchers, machine guns and rocket propelled grenades. One account even suggested that they had Anti-Aircraft (AA) capability. The Indian Task Force, therefore, carried self-loading rifles, Sten machine carbines, Carl Gustav

RCL rifles, howitzers and grenades. For the desired mobility between the islands, boats had been positioned at the Agra airfield during the night of November 3/4 but were not airlifted to Hulule because the situation had come under control before the aircraft loaded with boats got airborne. Mirage 2000 fighters also stoodby to provide cover to the transport aircraft. De-induction of troops commenced within three days.

External Support

Mussolini enjoyed the support of a part of the Italian population that wanted to see him free and at the helm. Some officers and men in the Italian Army had pledged support to the dictator. The Germans had an idea of this simmering dissent among the rank and file. They managed to coerce Italian Gen Ferdinando Soleti to accompany them when they raided Hotel Campo Imperatore. The idea was to use him as a shield against the Italian carabinieri. The ruse succeeded—the armed Italian guards who came forward to retaliate, lowered their weapons when they saw (their) Gen Soleti accompanying the Germans.

The Israelis did not enjoy such external support. They were on their own all along. In the case of the Maldives, it is logical to assume that the locals who supported President Gayoom could have stood in support of the Indian troops too. But their identity and numbers were not known. Besides, they were unarmed and, as such, their support was insignificant and could not be counted upon. The assistance of the controllers manning the airfield was invaluable.

Night Landing

The landing of gliders during Operation Eiche was in broad daylight. In the case of Operation Thunderbolt, the runway at Entebbe was well lit when the first aircraft landed. The Israelis positioned beacons on the airfield to guide the subsequent aircraft. Besides, they had trained and practised landing in absolute darkness.

In the case of Operation Cactus, the runway lights were switched *ON* momentarily to enable the IAF aircraft to align itself with the runway. They were switched *OFF* almost immediately afterwards. The lights were switched *ON* again when the aircraft was about to land.

Ingenuity

The success of such operations without the use of ingenuity is not feasible. To cite just one instance: Skorzeny made use of a travel brochure to get information about Hotel Campo Imperatore where Mussolini was housed. The Indian Task Force likewise, referred to a coffee table book to gain knowledge on the islands. Volumes can be written about the ingenuity of the Israelis who crafted Operation Thunderbolt. Airlift of a limousine for deception was just one example of their ingenuity.

Casualties

One of the German gliders crashed into the hillside and most of its occupants were killed. There were no casualties in the small amount of firing that took place outside Hotel Campo Imperatore. In the Entebbe Raid, all the terrorists were killed[41] and an estimated 45 Ugandan soldiers died in actions that the Israeli commandos sought to avoid. The Israelis lost their leader, Jonathan Netanyahu in the operation.[42] In the case of Operation Cactus, the Indian Task Force did not suffer casualties. The fleeing rebels, however, killed 19 people on their way to the harbour. Still later, they killed a hostage on board the hostage ship, MV *Progress Light*.

Dedicated Men

In the planning stage, for two days, Skorzeny and Radl did not step out of their uniforms. In the freezing cold, Skorzeny leaned out of the reconnaissance aircraft to click pictures of Hotel Imperatore

41. Some unconfirmed accounts suggest that three of them were captured alive.
42. Some accounts suggest that two Israelis and a hostage were killed.

and the landing zone near it. Lt Warger, a teetotaller, consumed liquor to deceive the Italians and elicit information from them.

The Israelis had been on their feet for long hours on the days preceding the operation. Many of them were airsick after their low level flight from Lod airport to the mounting base. Yet they sustained themselves. So tired was Netanyahu that after the last bits of briefing and discussion with his men in the aircraft, he went and slept on the flight deck.

Operation Cactus is replete with similar examples. Brig Bulsara had been awake the previous night, hosting young officers. After briefing his men in the aircraft, he took a short nap. Maj Dhillon and his men who made the first contact with Gayoom had been awake continuously for nearly 24 hours when they met him. The aircrew, likewise, had been on duty and had flown in trying conditions for a prolonged period. By the time they landed back in Agra, they had been awake continuously for nearly the same amount of time (24 hours).

What Really Worked?

The grit of the men involved in the three operations was certainly a factor that ensured success. Over the years, people have attached more reasons for these successful operations.

The political allegiance of the Italian soldiers guarding Mussolini, and, hence, their will to fight, was doubtful. Moreover, the Italians did not expect a German assault atop Mount Gran Sasso because there was practically no space to enable landing on the small green patch near the hotel. The German gliders were modified for landing in restricted areas: they had rockets in the nose and tail-chutes. They cleverly manoeuvred past the asymmetry of numbers, which favoured the guards: they coerced Gen Ferdinando Soleti of the Italian Army to march with the German contingent while entering the hotel. Seeing him, the Italians lowered their weapons and let the Germans walk away with Mussolini. According to Skorzeny, healthy optimism and

unflinching resolve had triumphed over all their trials and tribulations.[43]

The Israeli government's decision to opt for military action was perhaps the most difficult part of Operation Thunderbolt; along with a hundred lives, the Israeli national pride and prestige were at stake. The political leadership's confidence in its armed forces laid the foundation for the success. Speed, surprise and secrecy were behind the success of Operation Thunderbolt.

In the case of Operation Cactus too, it was a bold political decision, well supported by the military leadership. The lightning action and the synergy among the three Services and the diplomatic corps were unprecedented. Above all, it was the perception of the rebels—of the numerical asymmetry in favour of the Indian paratroopers—that forced them to withdraw.

The Rewards

Skorzeny was awarded the "Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross" by the orders of Hitler within about four hours of landing safely at Vienna with Mussolini. At midnight, Hitler himself called him; congratulated him and promoted him to the rank of "Stumbannfurer".[44] Next day, Goring awarded a "Gold Flying Badge" to Skorzeny. On Skorzeny's request, Goring agreed to award the "Knight's Cross" to two of his men. A propaganda film was made on the actual operation. Skorzeny and his men who rescued Mussolini were invited to a public function—"Harvest Thanksgiving"—where Skorzeny was asked to present three Knight's Crosses of the War Service Cross to civilian recipients.[45]

The Entebbe Raid, which was codenamed Operation Thunderbolt initially, was renamed Operation Jonathan to honour the leader who sacrificed his life in the operation. A military base was also renamed 'Camp Jonathan' after the raid.

43. Skorzeny, n. 4, loc. 1502.
44. Ibid., loc. 1540.
45. Ibid., loc. 1608-1635.

Brig Bulsara and Col Joshi were awarded the Uttam Yudh Sewa Medal (UYSM) and Yudh Sewa Medal (YSM) respectively. A Vayu Sena Medal (VM) awarded to Gp Capt Bewoor was later converted to VM (Gallantry). Brig Bulsara's efforts to get recognition of the gallantry of his men and a special recognition for Mr AK Banerjee were in vain. According to Brig Bulsara, the reason why Operation Cactus was not given recognition and no medal was instituted to commemorate the success of the operation was that there was no casualty. In a letter to Mr AK Banerjee, he had lamented that perhaps a "butcher's bill" was a criterion for recognition.[46] Nassim Nicholas Taleb analyses this type of approach in his book titled, *The Black Swan*:

> We remember the martyrs who died for a cause that we knew about, never those no less effective in their contribution but whose cause we were never aware of––precisely because they were successful. Our ingratitude toward the poètes maudits fades completely in front of this other type of thanklessness. This is a far more vicious kind of ingratitude: the feeling of uselessness on the part of the silent hero.[47]

Well-Reasoned Risk: A Common Thread

These three operations were Black Swan events. Black Swan events are characterised by three attributes. First, they lie outside the realm of regular expectations; the cognitive past does not point convincingly to their possibility. Second, they carry an extreme impact. And third, in spite of their rarity, human nature makes people concoct explanations for them to be explainable and predictable. In summation: rarity, extreme impact and retrospective predictability constitute Black Swan events.[48]

In that regard, all three of these operations were rare and unexpected; and the result in each case was spectacular. For

46. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee.
47. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan* (London: Penguin, 2010)Taleb, p. xxvii.
48. Ibid., p. xxii.

years, strategists have tried explaining their successful outcomes. Interestingly, if one or more of these operations had failed, the *pundits* would have explained (read *justified*) their failure, too.

Operation Eiche, Operation Thunderbolt and Operation Cactus have stood out for the daring of the men involved and their will to accept extreme risk. These operations have shown that all elements essential for the success of a military operation shall never fall in place simultaneously. If one were to wait for everything to be in order, it would never be possible to undertake such operations, let alone succeed in them.

There are times to take well-reasoned risks, and victory is its own validation.

— Anthony S. Cordesman[49]

49. Anthony S. Cordesman, *The Iraq War–Strategy, Tactics and Military Lessons* (Dehra Dun: Natraj, 2006), p. 60.

13

Asides!

Each minute of the 24 hours commencing 0600h on November 3, 1988, was crammed with action. From mustering men to collecting equipment; from preparing and loading the aircraft to refuelling them; from planning and briefing the operation to directing people—there was no time to stand and stare. Yet, interesting things happened; things, which did not affect the conduct or the outcome of Operation Cactus, but left an imprint on the minds of those involved. Here are some of them.

"The Island will Sink!"

Those were anxious moments when the *Who's Who* of the political and military leadership got together with the best brains of the diplomatic corps to think of a way to save the Maldivian president. There were doubts about the strength of the rebel force; and there was a lingering fear of a hostile reception at the time of landing. The worst fear was that of the IAF aircraft, with the troops on board, being blown up by the rebels at the time of touchdown. There were suggestions to respond with maximum force. In the enthusiasm to outdo the rebels, a general officer suggested inducting more troops than the number that had been suggested in the beginning by the COAS. Humour was not lost by a witty Ronen Sen, who said, "Let's not induct so many troops—the island will sink with their weight."

The congregation had a hearty laugh.

"We Know Where you are Headed!"

Some of the unit ladies came to bid goodbye to their husbands as the wheels began rolling from the cantonment. They enquired where the menfolk were headed. The menfolk expressed their ignorance. [While most menfolk actually did not know where they were going, the senior officers who were privy to the information were asked not to divulge the destination until they were airborne.] To this response, the ladies smiled and said, "We'll tell you where you are going…you are going to the Maldives! It is in the news that India is likely to provide military assistance to the Maldives." The joke that did the rounds after the operation was, "The *dhobi* knew about the operation before we did!"

So much for secrecy!

Junior Warrant Officer (JWO) RP Mishra's Stratagem

About an hour from Hulule, Gp Capt Goel told me to deplane with the troops and control a paradrop if a need arose later. He advised me to take one of the PJIs to assist me. I returned to my men and apprised them of the situation. I asked for a volunteer to join me. All hands went up; some of them raised both their hands. After some friendly ado, I told the senior-most and the most experienced of the lot, WO Karam Singh to join me. JWO RP Mishra was not one to give up so easily. "Sir, it is a dangerous situation. It could be a matter of life and death. Bullets will be flying. We are old people; have seen enough life. You are young; you have been married for just about three years and have a small son. You have much to look forward in life. I suggest that you stay back and let two of us oldies go," he suggested.

Everyone burst out laughing at his logic. I told him to relax.

A Modern Day Casabianca

Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian high commissioner to Malé, recalls that when he arrived at the South Block for the meeting at 1100h, he did not know that he was not going to return home soon. He told his taxi driver that he would be gone for about two hours, and asked

him to wait. The modern day *Casabianca* stood there until very late in the evening. He then returned to the high commissioner's residence where he was told that the HC had pushed off to Agra, and he (the taxi driver) could leave.

Fratricide, Almost!

There were no casualties through Operation Cactus. But there were three instances of men almost getting killed by own people–– not exactly fratricide in each case. The first instance was when the troops after deplaning from Friendly One fanned out in all directions. Many of them filed past the tarmac on to the runway. They almost got run over by the second aircraft, which landed after about 15 minutes.

In the second instance, Capt RD Punekar who had been directed to approach Malé Island from a different direction to mislead the rebels, strayed closer to the location where Maj Dhillon and his men were active. Seeing a boat approaching the shore, Dhillon challenged the occupants. On getting no response, he ordered his troops to let go of a burst of light machine gun fire into the water around the boat. The situation eased when Punekar shouted, "Sir, it's me, Punekar! Hold fire!"

In the third instance, early on the morning of November 4, 1988, after President Gayoom had been rescued and when it was still a bit dark, Brig Bulsara, Lt Col KKK Singh and another officer drove around the island of Hulule in a jeep. They were stopped by an alert *jawan*, who pointed a loaded rifle at them and cocked it—threatening to shoot. Brig Bulsara shouted at him to hold fire. "I am your brigade commander! I am Brig Bulsara! Lower your weapon!" he screamed. Bulsara and the others heaved a sigh of relief when the *jawan* lowered his weapon, reluctantly though. KKK recalls, "In the Indo-Pak War (1971), under similar circumstances a Maj Sethi was actually shot at by his own troop."[1]

1. Interview with Col KKK Singh.

Without Weapons in a Hostile Land

It is a standard practice to draw Service weapons when operating in a hostile environment. In the hustle and bustle of the briefing and preparation, the aircrew could not draw their personal weapons. Since the PJIs were expected to return with the aircraft, they too did not draw small arms from the Station Armoury. Seven AF personnel, viz. two PJIs (WO Karam Singh and I), Plt Offr UK Gambhir (the ATC officer) and four of his ADSOs were without weapons on the island. It was an eerie feeling being on Hulule Island that night with bullets flying over our heads. I had carried a *jump knife* but it could not even peel a banana (because of the shape) let alone be used for combat.

"My Men are Thirsty!"

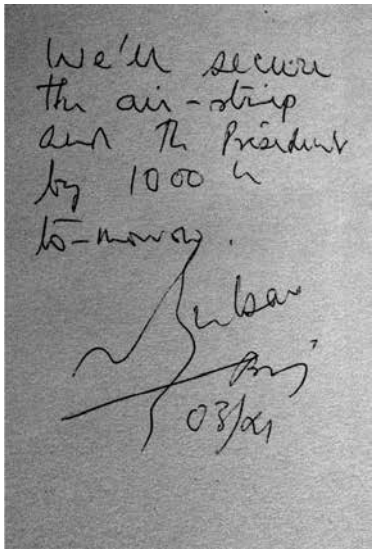
The fleeing rebels had damaged a water treatment plant. Therefore, in the following days, drinking water became a scarce commodity. For some time, Coke was more readily available than plain water. Young Capt Basant Repswal[2] was concerned about his thirsty colleagues in the Maldives. He hijacked a lorry and brought drinking water to an AN-32 aircraft parked on the tarmac in Trivandrum. He threatened the aircrew with dire consequences if they did not airlift the consignment to Hulule, where the desalination plant had been damaged and the brigade was thirsty.[3]

Being in the Lead Aircraft

To begin with, the top brass of the air force—Gp Capt AK Goel, the airborne force commander and Gp Capt AG Bewoor, commanding officer of 44 Squadron—were in the lead aircraft. Brig Bulsara, Col Joshi and Maj Dhillon, who were leading the paratroopers, were seated in the second aircraft. I was in the same aircraft as Brig Bulsara. Minutes before take-off, Brig

2. Of 622 Company ASC (Composite) PARA.
3. Brig FFC Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim, ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (Lancer: New Delhi, 1993), p. 215.

Bulsara realised that our aircraft was No.2 in the formation. He sent me running to the other aircraft, to Gp Capt Goel and Gp Capt Bewoor—who were, by then, busy with their checks before start-up—to request them to change the order and put his aircraft in the lead. The brigade commander was not convinced when I told him on return that it was too late to make any changes. He sent me back to the Goel-Bewoor duo to impress upon them that all the senior (army) officers who were responsible to take decisions on the ground were in our aircraft. If the other aircraft landed first at Hulule, the troops and the young officers accompanying them would be literally rudderless for want of further orders. This time, Maj Bhatia, the brigade major came along to stress the point. The commanders in blue saw reason in the demand and resorted to interchange of crew between the two aircraft to accommodate the operational need. Such action in the nick of time—when the Author Book, Form-700 and other related documents had been signed and the pilots were half way through with their checks—was unprecedented. It was a rare example of synergy and flexibility.

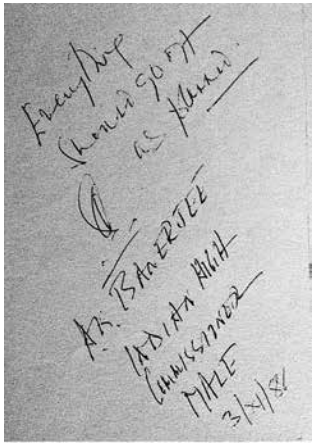


"We'll Secure the Air-Strip and the President by 1000h Tomorrow!"

It was a long flight from Agra to Hulule. Having done everything that I was expected to do, and ascertain, as a PJI on board the aircraft, I started walking around in the aircraft--generally talking to the troops and boosting their morale. I walked up to Brig Bulsara who was sitting quietly and revising his plans pensively. I flipped open my scribble pad and nudged him to write what was uppermost in his

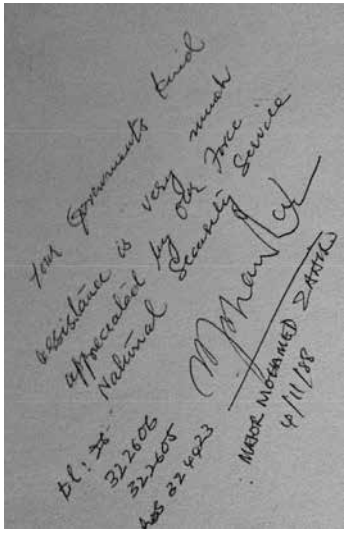
mind at that point in time. Without a second thought, the ever so confident paratrooper scribbled: "We'll secure the air-strip and the President by 1000h tomorrow."

The president was rescued well before 1000h.



"Everything Should go off as Planned."
A little later, I was taken aback when I saw a gentleman in civvies occupying a seat behind the crew in our aircraft. My curiosity led me to seek his introduction. I realised that I was *face-to-face* with Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian high commissioner to the Maldives. I requested him also to pen the thoughts that were churning in his mind. He wrote: "Everything should go off as planned."

A Gesture of Maldivian Gratefulness



Next morning when, peace had descended on the islands, I went to the Headquarters of the National Security Service on Malé Island. There I met Maj Mohammed Zahir of the National Security Service of the Maldives. His cordiality encouraged me to make a rather unusual request. I expressed a wish to meet President Gayoom. He accepted the request with a caveat: "The president has been stressed over the last few days; he is resting now. I'll take you to him later in the day." Not being sure of my return plan, I asked him to pen his thoughts for me. He wrote: "Your government's kind assistance is very much appreciated by our force. National

Security Service." He gave me a cap badge and a formation sign of the NSS.

Those three notes and insignia, along with the memory of the day spent in the Maldives, are my prized possessions.

"…or I'll Kill you!"

Company Havaldar Major (CHM) Ramkhilari of 6 PARA was a conscientious paratrooper. When his boat reached Malé, he found that everyone had disembarked, except one man. When the man hesitated, Ram Khilari threatened to shoot him. The man obeyed and followed the CHM's orders. This hesitant man turned out to be a sapper who was detailed to take the boat back to Hulule. A day later, the sapper was declared missing by his unit—411 PARA. His commanding officer was a relieved man when he saw the man standing behind the Maldivian president in pictures splashed on the front pages of the local newspapers.[4]

For fear of his life, he had been doing duties assigned by the stern CHM.

Avoiding Audit Objections

Once the troops were settled on the islands, regular supply of food began from the mainland (India). A *langar*[5] was established to serve freshly cooked food to the troops. Among other ration items, there was meat on hoof.[6] While others savoured the food, the mess staff were busy collecting and drying the skins of the goats for the purpose of accounting—to avoid audit objections.

4. Interview with Brig RJS Dhillon.
5. *Langar* is the popular name for the men's cookhouse.
6. *Meat on hoof* is a term used for live goats supplied as a part of the rations; to be killed and cooked as and when required.

Epilogue

The high tide will erase my footprints, and the wind will blow away the foam. But the sea and the shore will remain forever.

— Kahlil Gibran

Operation Cactus was launched nearly 30 years ago. Given the situation as it was on that November day in 1988, the strategists—military and civilian alike—would have predicted the probability of success at values infinitesimally close to *zero*. Yet, on the advice of the military leadership, the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi took a bold decision, and the armed forces struck daringly. Operation Cactus was a success—Gayoom and his government were saved and the hostages, rescued.

Operation Cactus did not get the due recognition as a military operation although the primary objective of rescuing the Maldivian President was achieved. No ribbon/medal was instituted to commemorate the success. Instead, there was an effort to apportion blame for the notional delay of about four hours in the take-off of the first wave – the friendly formation took off at 1800 h instead of 1400 h as committed by the COAS to the PM.

The then Vice Chief of the Army Staff, Lt Gen SF Rodrigues felt that the then brigade major (of 50 (I) PARA Brigade), Maj Vinod Bhatia was partly responsible for the hold-up. But for the benign intervention of the then COAS and the unconditional support of the brigade commander, Brig FFC Bulsara, Maj Bhatia would have incurred strictures and admonition.

Nearly three decades later…

Maj Bhatia had risen to be a lieutenant general—the Director General Military Operations (DGMO). Gen VN Sharma and Lt

Gen Rodrigues (later, general and army chief) had been retired for almost a quarter of a century. Circumstances got the three general officers—Sharma, Rodrigues and Bhatia—under one roof. Over a cup of tea in South Block, Gen VN Sharma pointed at Lt Gen Bhatia, and in his trademark witty manner, told Gen Rodrigues: "Rody, if you had had your way then [in 1988-89, after Operation Cactus], Bhatia would not have been the DGMO today."

Glossary

Airborne Operation
An operation involving the air movement into an objective area of combat forces and their logistic support for execution of a tactical, operational, or strategic mission. The means employed may be any combination of airborne units, air transportable units, and types of transport aircraft, depending on the mission and the overall situation.

Airlanded Operation
An operation involving movement by air with a designated destination for further ground deployment of units and personnel and/or further ground distribution of supplies.

Authorisation Book
Popularly called the *Autho Book*, it is an auditable document maintained in the squadrons to keep a record of authorisation of flights by the competent authority, and includes information regarding the date, aircraft (tail number), crew and the commitment.

Automatic Activation Device (AAD)
A mechanical (barometric) device fitted on to a parachute to initiate an opening sequence, depending on a preset height/ time.

Cannibalisation
It is the withdrawal of the parts of one unserviceable main assembly of an item of equipment to make another one functional.

"Chhatri Mata ki Jai!"
Translated as: *Long Live Goddess Parachute*—it is the battlecry of the Indian paratroopers.

Cruising Speed
A speed for an aircraft, usually somewhat below maximum, that is comfortable and economical.

Cylume Stick
A flexible sealed plastic tube filled with chemicals, which on activation, provides illumination for instruments (altimeter, compass, etc.) during night jumps.

Drifter
A drifter is person paradropped singly for assessment of drift due to the effective velocity of wind. A drifter does not manipulate the lift webs (straps of the parachute) or the suspension lines to give a true assessment of the drift.

Drop Zone (DZ)
A designated area on the ground on which an airlift aircraft attempts to deliver its personnel or cargo by dropping them.

Fallschermjagers
German paratroopers

Fiddler
Like a *drifter*, a *fiddler* is also dropped to assess the drift of a parachute. When dropped as a *fiddler*, a jumper manipulates his parachute and tries to land in a manner and in a location that is suitable and possible. Assessment of drift by dropping a *fiddler* is a peace-time training requirement.

Form 700
A document––specific to an aircraft––maintained as a record of all the Turn Round Servicing (TRS) carried out on it.

Geronimo!
Battle cry of American airborne troops.

Glide Ratio (Ram Air Parachute)
It is the distance a parachute flies forward for the distance it descends or the ratio of the horizontal distance travelled divided by the vertical distance travelled in still air. The higher a canopy's glide ratio, the flatter its glide.

High Altitude, High Opening (HAHO)
HAHO is a jump technique generally used by the special forces. During a HAHO jump, a freefall jumper exits the aircraft at a high altitude (generally above 20,000 ft amsl), opens the parachute immediately, and then *flies* the parachute to the landing zone miles away. The HAHO jump technique offers one of the best and most stealthy ways to infiltrate a target.

Landing Zone (LZ)
Area designated for the landing of an airborne force.

Meat on Hoof
These are live goats supplied as a part of the rations; to be killed and cooked, as and when required.

Mounting Base
A base designated for an airborne force to muster before getting airborne for an operation.

Pathfinders
Paratroopers who are inserted or dropped before the main force to set up, mark and operate drop zones, pick-up zones, and helicopter landing sites for airborne operations, air resupply operations, or other air operations in support of the ground forces.

Payload
Payload is the carrying capacity of an aircraft or launch vehicle, usually measured in terms of weight. Depending on the nature of the flight or mission, the payload of a vehicle may include cargo, passengers, flight crew, munitions, scientific instruments or experiments, or other equipment.

Ram Air Parachute
It is a rectangular parachute made of two layers of fabric, which trap the air and give it an aerofoil shape. The aerofoil shape gives the parachute glide characteristics so that the canopy covers horizontal distance as it descends. Used by the special forces all over the world, it enables a combatant to cover great distances under the canopy, stealthily.

Range
It is the maximum distance an aircraft can fly between take-off and landing, as limited by fuel capacity in powered aircraft.

Static Line
A line attached to a parachute on one end and a strong point in the aircraft, on the other. It initiates the deployment sequence of a parachute when a jumper bails out of an aircraft in flight.

Steerable Parachute
A typical parachute descends vertically in '*no wind*' conditions. A steerable parachute, because of its design features, covers some horizontal distance as it descends through the air. Steerability of a parachute enables a paratrooper to avoid small obstacles during descent/ landing.

Stick
A number of paratroopers lined up to jump in one pass over the drop zone.

Streamer
A streamer is a long piece of paper or cloth with the descent characteristics of a parachute. It is dropped to assess the actual drift due to prevailing winds.

Leaflet 1
Airlift Data: Op Cactus[1]

Operation Cactus saw the Indian Air Force rising to the occasion yet again to meet an operational challenge. The airlift of troops, supplies and ordnance was undertaken at short notice. It entailed smooth but swift shifting of gears from a state of inertia to a state of extreme action. With the imminence of military action, the requirement of airlift was a foregone conclusion. So, even before the political leadership gave the nod, preparations were underway to move the troops. The transport aircraft units had been asked to standby to move at short notice. As a result, by 1200h, i.e. around the time the formal directive was being given by the prime minister, the IAF had confirmed the availability of more than 50 aircraft (see Table 1), although all were not put to use instantly.

Table 1: Aircraft Availability

Type	Numbers
IL-76	5
AN-32	35
AN-12	2
Avro	1
Mi-8	4
Mirage-2000	4
Canberra Interdictor	2
Source: IAF Archives	

1. The information contained in this leaflet has been compiled from several different sources.

The first two IL-76 aircraft took off at 1756 h and 1758 h respectively on November 3, 1988, with 316 troops, one RCL jeep, one communication jeep and other essential equipment. They ferried direct to the Maldives, landing at Hulule at 2200h. Three more aircraft were airborne from Agra later in the night and landed the troops in the wee hours of November 4, 1988. Between 2200 h on November 3, 1988, and 0930 h on November 4, 1988, nearly 800 fully equipped troops with vehicles had been airlanded and by 1100h, 1650 troops and 16 vehicles had been positioned.

The AN-32 aircraft airlifted another 672 personnel on November 5, 1988. Fifteen AN-32, one AN-12, two Avro and six IL-76 aircraft were pressed into service for the airlift task. At one stage, 25 AN-32 aircraft were operating between Agra, Trivandrum and the archipelago. Table 2 gives an idea of the numbers involved.

Table 2: Details of Airlift (Personnel and Load)

Aircraft Type	Nos.	Troops/ Passengers	Other Load	Description
IL-76	05	804 troops 10 media	44,000 t	3 jeeps; 1 jeep cum RCL; 2 x tonne ammunition; 1 x trailer; 6 x guns
AN-32	23	669	37,400 t	1xmotorcycle, ammunition & rations
AN-32[2]	01	80	2,000 t	2 x water trailers
AN-32	02	87	-	-
Total	31	1,650	83.400 t	

Source: "Op Cactus History – IAF": Material for Clearance by Dte Of Int, Batch No. VII – Issue No. 18. File Reference: Air HQ 99717/83/38/Org ACAS(I)/3/DJC at Air HQ

Orders to de-induct came soon enough—November 5, 1988 saw the return of the first troops. Notwithstanding the hold-up due to inclement weather in the archipelago, the de-induction

2. Author's Note: This appears to be a typo; it could be AN-12, rather than AN-32.

continued unabated. A total of 18 AN-32, one AN-12, two Avro, seven IL-76 and two Mi-8 (helicopters) de-inducted 1,567 troops and 65 tonnes of load between November 5 and 13, 1988. The 200 NSG troops stationed at Trivandrum were also airlifted to New Delhi by the IAF. A contingent of troops (mainly 6 PARA Bn and 60 PARA Field Ambulance) stayed back at the behest of the Maldivian president.

Leaflet 2
Jumping with Paratrooper's Main (PTRM) Parachute

The Paratrooper's Main (PTRM) parachute has been the mainstay of paratrooping training in India for several decades. It was in regular use when the D-5 parachute was introduced in the mid-1980s; it continues to be in use albeit with some minor modifications. It resembles the American T-10 parachute, which has been in use since World War II. It is produced by the Ordnance Parachute Factory, Kanpur, and was used in the historical paradrop over Tangail (Indo-Pak War, 1971)—nearly 750 paratroopers were dropped in a span of about 45 minutes.

A jump with the PTRM parachute is undemanding. The jumper just has to fasten the harness, *hook up* the *static line* and bail out of the aircraft. The parachute deploys in the proximity of the aircraft—in the slipstream, literally. Jumps from relatively slow flying aircraft—the Dakota, Packet, Caribou, Avro and AN-32—are undertaken from a height of 1,250 ft AGL.[3] The aircraft's 'dropping speed' is 225 kmph.

The parachute deployment sequence is uncomplicated. The 16-ft long *static line* of the parachute is anchored to a strong point—normally a firmly stretched steel cable (*anchor cable*) inside the aircraft. When the jumper bails out of the aircraft, the *static line* stretches to its full length before breaking the *final tie* to trigger the deployment—the suspension lines are pulled out of the pack cover; followed by the *canopy*. Once the canopy and the suspension lines are fully stretched, another tie snaps and

3. Tactical jumps have been tried from as low as 750 ft AGL to achieve concentration of force on the ground and minimise the time taken to *rendezvous*.

the parachute and the jumper are detached from the aircraft; and the canopy deploys. The entire opening sequence takes place in the blinking of an eye. The parachute opens within about two seconds of the exit of the jumper from the aircraft without any effort from the jumper. Although the parachute is not *steerable,*[4] a paratrooper can avoid some small obstacles like an odd tree, an electrical cable, a small water body or a wall by pulling and manipulating the *risers*. With a rate of descent of 17 to 21 ft per second, the landings are soft.

A paratrooper is trained to jump with his personal weapon—in the 1980s, the personal weapon was the 7.62 mm Self-Loading Rifle (SLR) secured in the Airborne Individual Weapon Container (AIWC)—along with a haversack containing ammunition and food. Some troops in each platoon/ company jump with heavy weapons like the Carl Gustav recoilless rifle.[5] In a much larger Paratrooper's Airborne Equipment (PAE) bag—the size of a crouched adult, and almost as bulky—a paratrooper carries a lot of other equipment like the communication sets, batteries, etc. With these rather unwieldy containers, a paratrooper lumbers like a *cosmonaut* to the exit point (door) in the aircraft; the exit itself is a laboured exercise. Besides, these containers have to be lowered with a strap (20-odd ft-long) before landing lest they hurt the paratrooper at the time of touching down. Notwithstanding the difficulty and clumsiness of jumping with containers, they are *safe*. Training jumps entail mandatory jumps with the AIWC and PAE bag.

The PTRM harness has two distinct advantages over that of the D-5 parachute (discussed in Leaflet 3). One, it has a *quick release assembly,* which enables a paratrooper to get out of it quickly after landing. Two, it has a *canopy release assembly*, which enables a paratrooper to quickly get rid of the canopy after landing.

4. Some canopies are modified to give a little *steerability* and softer landings in light wind conditions.
5. It measures more than a metre and is bulkier and more unwieldy than the SLR.

Besides mitigating the vulnerability to enemy fire on landing, the simplicity of unfastening the harness bestows distinct advantages to a jumper in distress. In strong wind conditions, it enables the jumper to get rid of the parachute and avoid getting dragged on the ground after landing. More importantly, it enables deft handling of the situation when one is forced to land in water.

Parachute accidents have a demoralising effect on jumpers. Over the years, the jump drills with the PTRM parachute have been refined to such an extent that malfunctions have become manageable and accidents have become *rarest-of-the-rare* phenomena. In 1943, when para training had just begun in India, there was one fatal accident every 500 jumps: in the course of the initial 15,000 descents, 17 jumpers were killed.[6] In contrast, there was one fatal accident in 2,77,354 descents between July 2001–June 2010.[7] The extreme rarity of accidents is cited repeatedly during ground training to build the confidence, and boost the morale, of the paratroopers.

In conclusion, if a situation so demands, an untrained person can jump with a PTRM parachute and there is a high probability that he would land safely.[8]

Notwithstanding the versatility of the parachute and the simple jump techniques, the PTRM parachute is unsuitable for jumps from the IL-76 aircraft for technical reasons.

6. Col F.G. Neild L/RAMC (Retired), "Hazards of Early Parachuting in India (1941-43)," a first person account published in Maj Gen Afsir Karim, AVSM (Retd), ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (New Delhi, Lancer International, 1993), p. 17.
7. From the archives of PTS.
8. Such cases have been sited in chapter titled *"Chhatri Mata ki Jai"*.

Leaflet 3
Jumping with D-5 Parachute from IL-76 Aircraft

Indian paratroopers were introduced to jumping with the D-5 parachutes from IL-76 aircraft in December 1984. Until then, they had been used to the simplicity of the PTRM parachute, which had been the mainstay of paratrooping training for decades. The jump technique with the D-5 parachute was vastly different from that with the PTRM parachute.

The D-5 parachute had to be deployed manually by a paratrooper by pulling a ripcord handle. A barometric Automatic Activation Device (AAD), the KAP-3P[9], was fitted as an override in case the jumper failed to pull the ripcord handle. The ripcord handle was positioned on the left side of the harness, to be pulled with the right hand. Most jumpers used to find this rather unusual and difficult to get used to. The ripcord handle of the Z-5 reserve parachute too was positioned awkwardly.

A jumper fell, assisted by a *pilot chute*[10] for 5 seconds before he pulled the ripcord to initiate the parachute opening sequence. Tumbling at the time of exit or during the 5 seconds of fall could result in the fouling of the *pilot chute* with the body of the jumper or his weapon/ equipment. Therefore, a paratrooper was constrained to carry only small arms on his person. The rule of thumb was to avoid anything that protruded above the shoulder or below the knee because such *extensions* could foul with the *pilot-chute*. Therefore, a paratrooper jumping with the D-5 parachute used to be handicapped on the question of personal weapons. One is reminded of Operation

9 A Russian designation for the AAD, without an English equivalent.
10. A small parachute which initiates the deployment of the main parachute.

Mercury—the German airborne assault on Crete—in which the *Fallschirmjägers*[11] jumped with only pistols and machine pistols due to restrictions posed by their parachute design and the door size of their JU-52 aircraft. Their weapons were dropped separately in containers;[12] they were poorly armed when they landed. Many were killed even as they tried reaching the containers.[13]

Paratroopers are particularly vulnerable when they are getting out of their parachute harnesses after landing. In a hostile environment, they are easy targets for that duration. Therefore, the time taken to come out of the parachute harness is a critical factor. The D-5 parachute harness did not have a *quick release mechanism*—a jumper could take 15 seconds to half a minute (or more) to get out of the parachute harness depending on experience/ practice.[14]

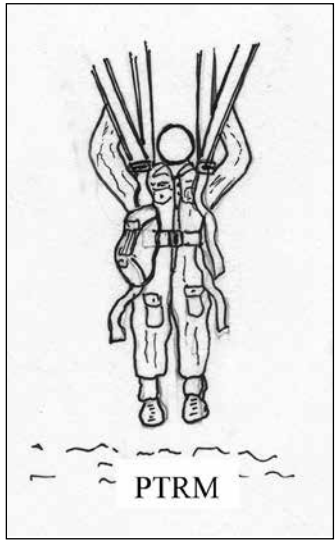
The drop height of 2,500 ft Above Ground Level (AGL) was double that of the PTRM parachutes. This meant more drift as compared to drift with the PTRM parachute.

Water landing is among the important emergencies which the troops are taught to handle. That drill had relevance in Operation Cactus due to the operation being in the proximity of the sea. The drill entails three actions: detaching and removing the reserve parachute; unfastening the harness of the main parachute and, discarding the harness and canopy; and swimming away from the parachute on landing in the water. In the absence of a *quick release box*, the drill used to be very cumbersome.

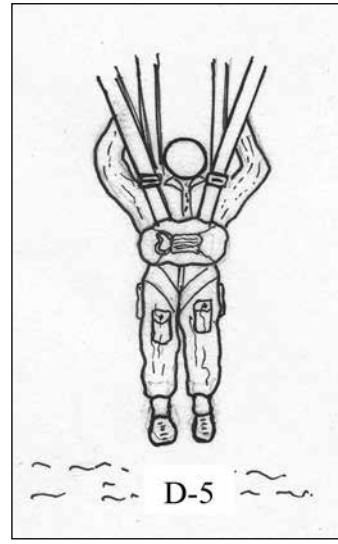
Briefly, the D-5 parachute was a difficult parachute to learn jumping with. Conversion training on the ground and live jump experience were essential to build the confidence of the jumpers.

11. *Fallschirmjäger* were the German paratroopers before and during World War II.
12. "Crete: Jumping Combat Equipment: The Importance of the Lowering Line," http://www.combatreform.org/hptll.htm. Accessed on January 20, 2016.
13. As per some estimates, out of the nearly 13,000 *Fallschirmjäger* paradropped, close to 5,000 were either killed or wounded besides those taken Prisoners of War (POWs).
14. The PTRM parachute had a *quick release box* and a *canopy release assembly*, which enabled quick riddance of the parachute and/ or the canopy after landing or in an emergency.

WATER LANDING DILEMMA



The water landing drill with PTRM Parachute was simple. One could get out of the parachute harness before touching the water surface and swim away from the canopy.



With D-5 Parachute, a jumper could not get out of the harness in flight. The canopy could foul with the jumper on landing in water.

Leaflet 4
Calculation of Drop Zone (DZ) Length and Drift due to Effective Wind on Parachutes

The length of a drop zone required for dropping paratroopers from an aircraft (IL-76 in this case) can be determined using simple mathematical calculations as given below:

Calculation* of DZ Length (for IL-76) for Paradrop[15]

Length of a Drop Zone (DZ) for paradrop (in feet) = $S_* R_{1*} N$, where S = Aircraft Speed in feet per second (fps), R = Jump Rate and, N = Number of Jumpers	
Aircraft Drop Speed, S	= 260 ± 10% kmph ≈ 250 kmph (say) ≈ 227.8 feet per second
Jump Rate (Side Door Exit), R	= 0.8 seconds/ jumper
Jump Rate (Aft End Exit), R_1	= 0.7 seconds/ jumper
Number of jumpers exiting simultaneously from each door for minimum spread on the ground (max 126)	= 30 from each side door + two sticks of 33 each from the aft end
Ideal number of jumpers exiting simultaneously from each door for minimum spread on the ground (for 65), N	= 15 from each side door + two sticks of 17 and 18 from the aft end
Minimum DZ length for 65 jumpers (without catering for overshoot or undershoot for error), in feet	= $S_* R_* N$ = 227.8 $_*$ 0.8$_*$ 18 ≈ 3281 feet (say 3,300 feet),
For simplicity, allowance for error (undershoot/overshoot) is being disregarded. Drop Zone requirement has been considered for 65 troops, as only that many parachutes were available for use.	

15. These calculations are based on the SOPs followed in PTS.

Thus, the length of the *drop zone*—assuming there were no winds and there was no overshoot/ undershoot error—required for 65 jumpers jumping from IL-76 aircraft (four point exit) was 3,300 ft. The runway length available was 7,600 ft (in November 1988). This was sufficient for safe landing of troops. In absolute no wind condition, if the troops exited over the runway (allowing for the forward throw on exit), they would land on the runway.

The problem was of drift due to winds. Drift that would be experienced by the parachutes (D-5) due to the prevailing winds had to be offset by the aircrew to prevent the troops landing into the sea.

For the D-5 parachute, it had been worked out that a paratrooper jumping at 2,500 ft AGL experienced a drift of about 80 ft in effective wind velocity of 1 kmph. Since, the Maldives are located north of the equator, easterly winds—about 20 kmph—were expected (actual weather was not known). Thus, the drift experienced by the jumpers would have been about 1,600 ft. Considering the dimension of the island of Hulule, the troops would have drifted into the sea—spelling the nemesis of the operation. A *streamer* or a *drifter* could not have been dropped in the night to assess the drift. Dropping smaller sticks of jumpers to attain progressive accuracy would have increased the number of passes, and, thereby, the flying activity over the runway, eliminating the surprise, and alerting the terrorists. The darkness of the night and absence of any ground references would also have compromised accuracy.

Therefore, the planners sensibly rejected the idea of a para-drop on the runway—a repetition of the histories of Operation Mercury (1941) and Operation Husky (Sicily, 1943) was scrupulously avoided.

Leaflet 5
The Who's Who at the Conference in Ops Room

Everyone even remotely connected with the action to deal with the crisis in the Maldives was present in the Ops Room in South Block. Some prominent people who were present at the conference were:

• Rajiv Gandhi	Prime Minister
• Mr KC Pant	Defence Minister
• Mr P Chidambaram	Minister of State (Home Ministry)
• BG Deshmukh	Cabinet Secretary
• Mr TN Seshan	Secretary Defence/ Internal Security
• Ronen Sen	Joint Secretary, Prime Minister's Office (PMO)
• Kuldip Sahdev	Joint Secretary, Sri Lanka, Burma, Maldives
• AK Banerjee	Indian High Commissioner (HC), Malé
• AK Verma	Director Research and Analysis Wing (R&A W)
• Gen VN Sharma	Chief of the Army Staff
• Lt Gen SF Rodrigues	Vice Chief of the Army Staff (VCOAS)
• Lt Gen VK Singh	Director General of Military Operations (DGMO)
• Maj Gen VR Raghavan	Additional Director General of Military Operations (ADGMO)

• Brig VP Malik	Deputy Director General Military Operations (DDGMO)
• Air Mshl NC Suri	Vice Chief of the Air Force Staff (VCAS)
• Mr KPS Menon	Foreign Secretary
• Vice Adm G Hiranandani	Vice Chief of the Naval Staff (VCNS)

The following officers were present for a part of the conference:

• Brig SV Sapatnekar	Military Operations Directorate
• Gp Capt Ashok K Goel	Directorate of Operations (T&H)
• Brig VP Malik	Director of Military Intelligence (DMI)

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