

OPERATION CACTUS: SOME PARALLELS

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A touch of Otto Skorzeny and Entebbe. Good Show!

— Lt Col “Baboo”Sapru¹

History is replete with examples of military operations which have tested the will and ingenuity of warriors to overcome odds. For long, Operation Eiche² (Italy, 1943) and Operation Thunderbolt (Uganda, 1976)³ have stood out as textbook examples of perfection in the conduct of military operations in the face of uncertainty and high stakes. Operation Cactus (the Maldives, 1988) was a similar operation (Op) embarked upon by the Indian armed forces to provide succour to Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the beleaguered president of the Maldives. Sometimes willingly, sometimes grudgingly, Op Cactus has been compared with two of those most daring operations of all times. What follows is a look at some aspects of these three operations with a view to bringing out similarities and differences. But first, a word about each of the three operations.

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1. “About Op Cactus”, cited by Brig Bulsara in Maj Gen Afsir Karim AVSM (Retd), ed., *The Story of the Indian Airborne Troops* (Lancer: New Delhi, 1993), pp. 234-235.
2. Operation Eiche is also called “Operation Oak” outside Germany.
3. Op Thunderbolt is popularly known as the Entebbe Raid.

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**OP CACTUS (THE MALDIVES,
NOVEMBER 1988)**

*If the Maldivians were caught with their pants down,
50 Bde's at best were half-mast.*

— Brig FFC Bulsara⁴

In November 1988, some Maldivian nationals and their Sri Lankan allies attempted to overthrow the government of the Republic of Maldives headed by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. The president sought military assistance from the Indian Prime Minister (PM), Mr Rajiv Gandhi to save him and his country. On the advice of the military leadership, the PM gave the “go ahead!” The Indian response was prompt and decisive. In a daring airborne operation, the Indian Air Force (IAF) airlifted paratroopers who rescued the president and secured the airstrip; the Indian Navy coerced the fleeing terrorists into surrendering. Op Cactus projected the prowess of Indian diplomacy and showcased the remarkable synergy of the country's armed forces. Op Cactus was a success story in as much as the Indian armed forces achieved their aim, namely, the rescue of the president and the restoration of a legitimate government.

OP 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 leader⁵

4. Karim, ed., n. 1, p. 208.

5. Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Special Missions: The Memoirs of Hitler's Most Daring Commando* (S Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2011 Kindle Edition), loc. 1292.

At the height of World War II, 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. Despite his ouster, Mussolini enjoyed support from some quarters, therefore, his arrest was kept secret and he was moved to different locations, occasionally and secretly, to prevent a possible uprising.

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, Op 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.

OP THUNDERBOLT (UGANDA, 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)⁶

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 it got airborne from Athens on Sunday, June 27, 1976. After a halt at Benghazi (Libya), the terrorists took the aircraft to Entebbe (Uganda). Three more terrorists joined them later. They demanded the release of the Palestinians held in Israeli prisons on charges of terrorism in return for the hostages. They threatened to kill the hostages if the demands were not met

6. William Stevenson, *90 Minutes at Entebbe* (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 56.

All the passengers held in the old terminal building of Entebbe Airport were freed on July 4, 1976, after a week-long tempestuous operation.

The farthest in range, the shortest in time, and the boldest in imagination, Op Thunderbolt was a turning point in the civilised world's response to acts of terror.

by the deadline of 1400 h (Israeli time) on July 1, 1976. On the third day, the hostages were split into two groups: the Israeli and the non-Israeli. The non-Israeli group was released. The terrorists reiterated the demand for the release of their brethren held in Israeli prisons, including Kozo Okamoto⁷ 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.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin⁸ received the information about the hijack on the same day at 1330 h. By 1530 h, a crisis management team had been formed.

Israel regards the barter of 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".⁹ But under those extreme circumstances, the Israeli Cabinet fully supported by the opposition, took a unanimous decision initially to accede to the demands of the terrorists. The decision was made public.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the terrorists extended the deadline until after Sunday, July 4, 1976. This extension was given, in all likelihood, because Idi Amin, the Ugandan president—who was supporting the cause of the terrorists covertly—was away in Mauritius, but it 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 a slim chance, the Israelis succeeded. All the passengers held in the old terminal

7. A Japanese enlisted by the PLO, who killed 24 people at Lod Airport in 1972.

8. A retired general and a former chief of Israel's Military Staff.

9. Stevenson, n. 6, p. x.

10. Iddo Netanyahu, *Yoni's Last Battle: The Rescue at Entebbe, 1976* (New York: Gefen Books, 2001 Kindle Edition), loc. 483-486.

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SOME PARALLELS

Three Rescue Operations, Each with a Difference

All three of these operations were meant to effect a rescue of some type. In two cases—Op Eiche and Op Cactus—a prominent 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 Op Thunderbolt, the hostages had to be rescued from the terrorists and airlifted from Entebbe (in Uganda) to Israel. Op Cactus required positioning of the task force on an island nearly 2,600 km away. The scenes of action for Op Eiche (about 100 km away from the mounting base) and Op 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; 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

Op 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 the "go ahead!" He had told his Cabinet that the government would have to resign if the operation failed.¹²

In the case of Op Cactus, the idea of sending the National Security Guards (NSG) to rescue President Gayoom was rejected in the early stages of decision-making. Since it was a request (read SOS) from the head of the state of a friendly country, Op 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 Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) and the Vice Chief of the Army Staff (VCAS) assured him of its feasibility. Once the decision to go ahead was taken, the planning and execution was 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 close to zero.

In the case of Op Eiche, Mussolini was kept under house arrest in Hotel Campo Imperatore atop Mount Sasso in 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 Op Thunderbolt, the 104 hostages were held at gunpoint in

11. Skorzeny, n. 5, loc. 1072-1704.

12. Netanyahu, n. 10, loc. 2584-2593.

the old terminal building of Entebbe Airport. A wrong action by the Israeli raiding team would have resulted in carnage—it would have led to the killing of all the hostages. Op Cactus was no different—President Gayoom was hiding on Malé Island, which measured 1 km by 2 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 Op Eiche) and in favour of the terrorists/ rebels in the case of Op Thunderbolt and Op Cactus respectively.

Method of Delivery and Anticipated Casualties

Time was of essence in each case. Use of the fastest means of delivery was a dire necessity. Therefore, use of surface means to position the task force was out of the question; the delivery of the force to the scene of action by air was an axiomatic choice. In all the three cases, the skills and the daring of the pilots mattered because, 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 very 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 Op 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 percent.¹⁴

13. William H McRaven, *Spec Ops—Case Studies in Special Operations: Theory and Practice* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 178.

14. Skorzeny, n. 5, loc. 1277.

In the case of Op 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.

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 of 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 use of rubber dinghies. This idea 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, all the hostages and all the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) men could be killed.¹⁷

In the case of Op 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 apprehension that a large number of troops could drift because of the prevailing winds, and land in the water. The paratroopers using the D-5 parachutes¹⁸ were handicapped: they could not carry their usual rifles [7.62 mm Self-Loading Rifles (SLRs)] and would not be able to discard the parachutes expeditiously if they landed in the 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 70:30.¹⁹ Brig Vivek Sapatnekar too had estimated that a high percentage would land

15. Gili Cohen, "How the Entebbe Raid Could Have Unfolded: Declassified Recordings Reveal Alternative Plans," *Israel News*, July 3, 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. 10, loc. 2584-2593.

18. The D-5 parachute was the only parachute that could be jumped with from the IL-76 aircraft.

19. Bulsara in Karim, ed., n. 1, p. 212.

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 re-inforced by para commandos and capture the airport by night.²⁰

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.

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 The trust that the leadership places in the paratroopers is summed up in these lines from Lt Gen William P Yarborough:²² “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.”

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

20. Brig Vivek Sapatnekar (Retd), *Address C/O 56 APO: Location Unknown* (Copyright © VivekSapatnekar, 2008), pp. 164-165.

21. In the case of Op Neptune Spear (killing of Osama bin Laden, Abbottabad, 2011) also, Team Six were qualified paratroopers.

22. Foreword to Lt Gen Edward M Flanagan Jr (Retd), *AIRBORNE: A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), p. x.

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.²³ 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 through the operation. Among others on board to facilitate the mission were the Operations Branch Chief Maj Gen Yekutiel Adam and the Air Force Commander Maj Gen Benny Peled.²⁴ 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 Op Cactus, the Indian prime minister took the decision to launch the military operation to rescue Gayoom. The military Headquarters (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 Op Eiche. He chose him because, beyond proving his military prowess like the others, he had travelled across Italy on a motorcycle²⁵ 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 the rescue from Entebbe was different. The Sayeret

23. Skorzeny, n. 5, loc. 1052-1063.

24. Netanyahu, n. 10, loc. 2356.

25. McRaven, n. 13, p. 170.

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 levels 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 force/ team to undertake missions like Op Cactus. The leadership in the case of Op Cactus was incidental (almost). Brig FFC Bulsara, being the brigade commander of 50 (I) Para Brigade, was at the helm. He preferred 6 PARA although on the fateful day, its men were scattered all over and only a skeleton strength was readily available. 6 PARA, under the leadership of Col SC Joshi, had the confidence of the commander. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, was the captain of the lead aircraft, and since he was the Commanding Officer (CO) 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 demanding situations.

Interestingly, some level of spoken Italian was a criterion for the selection of the German troops in Op 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. This ploy was a big risk because it could have led to fratricide. There was no criterion of fluency of language for the Indian contingent. It is incidental that Capt (Indian Navy) Gopalachari's knowledge of the Tamil language (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 dearth of reliable intelligence. Skorzeny had several days to gather intelligence for Op Eiche. He flew over the target before the operation and took aerial photographs of the proposed landing zone. He also sent a doctor to fish for 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 were 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 Op Cactus, Mr AK Banerjee, the Indian high commissioner, who was in India at that time, had first-hand knowledge of the islands. He (as a civilian) accompanied the Indian task force in 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 the 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.²⁷ An abortive attempt was made to evacuate Mussolini

26. Netanyahu, n. 10, loc. 2395.

27. The Germans consulted even clairvoyants and astrologers in Berlin in the hope of learning about Mussolini's whereabouts. Skorzeny, n. 5, loc. 989.

from the island of Santa Maddalena. Even then, they had time to gather more intelligence and plan another operation. Skorzeny flew over the area of interest and clicked pictures to overcome the inadequacy of maps. 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 (July 1, 1976) 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 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 in Entebbe. They managed to get a limousine and got it painted as the Ugandan dictator's staff car to work up a deception plan. The drivers of the land rovers and the limousine practised off-loading their vehicles from 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 Op Cactus was much shorter. The Indian contingent could not afford elaborate planning. The first feelers of an impending requirement of a major airlift reached the functional levels in the air force at 0715 h 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

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28. Gp Capt AG Bewoor, "Indian Armed Forces Defeat Coup in Maldives," *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2014, p. 150.

29. Bulsara in Karim, ed., n. 1, p.208.

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. A major part of the briefing to the company commanders and the troops was done in flight. Even the distribution of ammunition—an activity that was otherwise against flight safety norms—was done in flight 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 on his role (as the second-in-command) at all by the Bde Cdr.

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 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 Op 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 be 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

30. The first wave of IL-76 aircraft was airborne at 1800 hrs.

31. Bewoor, n. 28, p. 154.

32. McRaven, n. 13, p. 172.

33. Interview with Brig GP Singh (3 PARA).

34. Interview with Col KKK Singh (17 PARA).

Secrecy

Hitler had warned Skorzeny to maintain absolute secrecy—only five people were to know about Op Eiche.³⁵ Heinrich Himmler³⁶ 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 heard 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, Sharm al-Sheikh.³⁸

It would not be incorrect to say that secrecy was incidental in the case of Op Cactus, to an extent though. 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—for leakage of information. Second, the plans were being firmed up until quite close to the take-off time. Many, including the author, 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 impression was that it was an operation in support of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka and that Sullur 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

35. McRaven, n. 13, p. 171.

36. Heinrich Himmler was the head of the Gestapo and Waffen SS.

37. Netanyahu, n. 10, loc. 2432.

38. *Ibid.*, loc. 2610.

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.

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 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 asymmetry in this case because the Ugandans were scattered. Besides, the killing of the four hijackers within minutes of the airlanding of the Israelis rendered the pure numerical asymmetry even more meaningless.

39. Interview with Maj Gen Harkirat Singh.

The Indian contingent outnumbered the rebels (3:1 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.

The Role of the Navy

Op Eiche ended with the rescue of Mussolini and safe take-off of the aircraft with the Italian dictator on board. Likewise, the lift-off of the Hercules aircraft with the rescued hostages on board marked the successful end of Op 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 Op Cactus, when the decision to help Gayoom was taken in Delhi. The INS *Betwa* was launched in anticipation. The captain of the frigate got the bare essential briefing when it was launched from Cochin. He was told that there had been a coup in Malé and that 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 hostages on board gave a significant role to the Indian Navy. It is a matter of chance that the INS *Godavari*, returning from an exercise in Australia, also joined the fray. The INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa* chased the rebel ship and coerced the rebels into surrendering.

Going for Overkill

The adversary's actual strength, and, therefore, his capability, in each case was not fully known. Therefore, the Germans went into the operation 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.

The use of words like Tamil, Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (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 (RPGs). One account even suggested that they had Anti-Aircraft (AA) capability. The Indian task force, therefore, carried the Self-Loading Rifles (SLR), sten machine carbines, Carl Gustav Recoilless (RCL) rifles, howitzers and grenades. For the desired mobility between the islands, boats had been positioned at Agra airfield in the night of November 3 and 4 but were not airlifted to Hulule because the situation had come under control before the aircraft loaded with boats got airborne. 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 in the rank and file. They managed to coerce Italian Maj 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 one of their (Italian) general officers accompanying the Germans.

The Israelis did not enjoy such external support. They were on their own all along. In 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.

Ingenuity

The success of such operations without the use of ingenuity is unimaginable. To cite just one—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 Op Thunderbolt. Airlift of a limousine for deception is 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 little bit of firing that took place outside Hotel Campo Imperatore. In the Entebbe Raid, all the terrorists were killed⁴⁰ and an estimated 45 Ugandan soldiers died in action that the Israeli commandos sought to avoid.

The Israelis lost their leader, Col Jonathan Netanyahu in the operation.⁴¹ In the case of Op 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 freezing cold, Skorzeny leaned out of the reconnaissance aircraft to click pictures of Hotel Imperatore and the landing zone near it. Lt Warger, a teetotaller, consumed liquor to deceive the Italians and elicit information from them.

40. Some unconfirmed accounts suggest that three of them were captured alive.

41. Another account of the raid suggests that two Israelis and a hostage were killed.

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 to these successful operations.

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 Sharm al-Sheikh, 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.

Op Cactus was full of similar examples. 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). The air warriors [Parachute Jump Instructors (PJIs), the Air Traffic Control (ATC) officer and his men] who disembarked the aircraft at Hulule with the paratroopers had not carried personal weapons. In the night, when the merchant vessel *Progress Light* with the rebels on board sailed past Hulule Island and there was an exchange of fire, these men had little choice but to hide behind the ATC tower to avoid stray bullets.

What Really Mattered/ 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 to 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 the Gran Sasso mountain because there was practically no space to enable landing on a 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. The Germans cleverly manoeuvred past the asymmetry of numbers, which favoured the guards; they coerced

Gen Ferdinando Soleti of the Italian Army to accompany the German contingent 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 resolution had triumphed over their trials and tribulations.⁴²

The Israeli government's decision to go in for military action was perhaps the most difficult part of Op 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 did matter in the outcome of Op Thunderbolt.

In the case of Op 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 "Stubbannfurer".⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

The Entebbe Raid, which was codenamed Op 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.

42. Skorzeny, n. 5, loc. 1502.

43. Ibid., loc. 1540.

44. Ibid., loc. 1608-1635.

Op Eiche, Op Thunderbolt and Op 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.

Quite a few officers and men were given awards for their exceptional service in Op Cactus but none of those awards was a gallantry award. 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 Op 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.⁴⁵Nassim 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 poètesmaudits 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.⁴⁶

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

45. Interview with Mr AK Banerjee.

46. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. xxvii.

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.⁴⁷

In that regard, all three of these operations were rare and unexpected; and the result in each case was spectacular. For years, strategists have tried explaining their successful occurrence. Interestingly, if one or more of these operations had failed, the *pundits* would have explained (read *justified*) their failure, too.

Op Eiche, Op Thunderbolt and Op 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. Cordesman⁴⁸

47. *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

48. Anthony S. Cordesman, *The Iraq War—Strategy, Tactics and Military Lessons* (Dehra Dun: Natraj, 2006), p. 60.