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### The Plight of the Missing 54 Defence Personnel of the 1971 Indo-Pak War

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Source: Spectrum-The Tribune



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## **Introduction**

Missing 54 refers to the personnel from Indian Armed Forces whose status was reported as “Missing in Action” and subsequently changed to “Killed In Action” after the gap of 7 years of being declared as Missing during the course of War. In 1974, after receiving from NOK of these defence personnel as well as from Intelligence Network, their presence was reported in Pakistan. The bonafide intention of this research paper is to put light on various complexities, patterns and loopholes which resulted in prolonged detention of these bravehearts even after 5 decades of war. It also covers logical rationale undertaken after an extensive research on this subject since 2006. It also covers the aspects of unfortunate handling of sensitive issue of War prisoner’s aftermath of war by our adversary. Various patterns developed by in-depth analysis of various war fronts which lead to capture of our Armed Forces Personnel have been embedded in this research paper as well. This research paper is in receipt by AFHQ(S), Command HQ(S) of Indian Army & IAF in the form of power point presentation since 2013. It has been acknowledged by AFHQ(S), HQ IDS, Command HQ(S).

## **WHO ARE MISSING 54?**

The first list came into public domain in 1979 after an extensive chasing of the matter by the NOK of Missing Defence Personnel. When more and more reports of their presence was confirmed from various corners, Govt.of India admitted that after the termination of war, personnel believed to be killed earlier in action are still alive and have not been returned.

### **List-1 published in 1979**

- 1. IC-12712 Maj SPS Waraich, 15 Punjab**
- 2. IC-14590 Maj KJS Sandhu, 15 Punjab**
- 3. IC-14457 Maj JS Malik, 8 Raj. Rif**
- 4. IC-18790 Maj AK Ghosh, 15 Rajput**
- 5. IC-20230 Maj SC Guleri, 9 Jat**
- 6. SS-19807 Maj AK Suri, 5 Assam**
- 7. R-295Z Lt Cdr Ashok Roy, Indian Navy [INAS 310] VrC, NM**
- 8. IC-23148 Capt Kalyan Singh Rathod, 5 Assam**
- 9. IC-23283 Capt Giri Raj Singh, 5 Assam**
- 10.IC-19294 Capt Kamal Bakshi, 5 Sikh**
- 11.SS-20095 Capt Ravinder Kaura, 39 Medium Regiment, VrC**

12. SS-22940 2/Lt Paras Ram Sharma, 5/8 GR
13. SS-23957 2/Lt Sudhir Mohan Sabharwal, 87 Light Regiment
14. 4657 F(P) Wg Cdr HS Gill, 47 Sqn
15. 5327 F(P) Sqn Ldr Mohinder Kumar Jain, 27 Sqn, VrC
16. 5006 F(P) Sqn Ldr Jal Manekshaw Mistry, 20 Sqn
17. 8404 F(P) Flt Lt Ramesh Gulabrao Kadam, TACDE
18. 8956 F(P) Flt Lt Sudhir Kumar Goswami, 5 Sqn
19. 9441 F(P) Flt Lt Harvinder Singh, 222 Sqn
20. 7662 F(P) Flt Lt VV Tambay, 32 Sqn
21. 7669 F(P) Flt Lt LM Sasoon, JBCU
22. 7812 F(N) Flt Lt RM Advani, JBCU
23. 7819 F(N) Flt Lt KS Nanda, 35 Sqn
24. 8659 F(P) Flt Lt SC Sandal, 35 Sqn
25. 9773 F(P) Flt Lt N Shankar, 32 Sqn
26. 9015 F(P) Flt Lt GS Rai, 20 Sqn
27. 9030 F(P) Flt Lt Ashok Balwant Dhavale, 1 Sqn
28. 8160 F(P) Flt Lt Tanmay Singh Dandoss, 26 Sqn
29. 10239 F(P) Flt Lt SC Mahajan, 5 Sqn
30. 5105 GD(P) Flt Lt Babul Guha, 1 Sqn [Indo-Pak War 1965]
31. 10576 F(P) Fg Offr KL Malkani, 27 Sqn
32. 4406 F(P) Fg Offr KP Murlidharan, 20 Sqn
33. NO.9208735 L/NK Jagdish Raj, Mahar Regiment
34. NO.682211303 L/NK Hazoora Singh
35. NO.1146819 Gnr Sujan Singh, 14 Field Regiment [Indo-Pak War 1965]
36. NO.1157419 Gnr Madan Mohan, 94 Field Regiment
37. NO.1239603 Gnr Pal Singh, 181 Light Regiment
38. NO.2461830 Sep Daler Singh, 15 Punjab

The second list was subsequently added after more information of presence of Armed Forces personnel was substantiated by Govt. Of India on receipt of inputs from NOK and Intelligence Network.

#### List-2

1. SS-22536 Capt Om Prakash Dalal, 14 Grenadiers
2. SS-19624 Capt DS Jamwal, 81 Field Regiment
3. Capt Vashisht Nath
4. IC-58589 Lt Vijay Kumar Azad, 1/9 GR
5. 4896 F(P) Sqn Ldr JD Kumar, 3 Sqn

6. 4409 GD(P) Sqn Ldr Devaprashad Chaterjee, 7 Sqn/20 Sqn [Indo-Pak War 1965]
7. 10249 F(N) Flt Lt Manohar Purohit, 5 Sqn
8. 10871 F(P) Fg Offr Sudhir Tyagi, 27 Sqn
9. 9812 F(P) Flt Lt SK Chibber, 108 Sqn
10. 7207 GD(P) Pilot Offr TS Sethi, 31 Sqn [Indo-Pak War 1965]
11. JC-41339 Sub Assa Singh, 5 Sikh
12. JC-59 Sub Kali Das, J&K Militia [Later re-designated as 8 JAK LI]
13. NO. 13719586 L/HAV Krishan Lal Sharma, 1 JAK RIF
14. NO. 2459087 Sep Jagir Singh, 16 Punjab
15. Sep Jaspal Singh, 15 Punjab

The list was tabled in Lok Sabha in 1979 by Hon'ble Minister of State for External Affairs Sh.Samarendra Kundu.

### **Maj Ashok Suri's Letter: The Founding Step**

Maj AK Suri, 5 ASSAM was tenating the appointment of Battalion Quartermaster during the start of hostilities in 1971. 5 ASSAM was deployed in Chamb Sector along the Western Sector. On 02/12/1971, he was leading a convoy to deliver ammunition, supplies and medical aid to the frontline company defences at Munnawar and Darh crossings of Tawi river. Enroute his convoy came under heavy artillery shelling. Right after shelling his whereabouts have been a subject of persistent mystery. It is pertinent to note that 5 ASSAM faced a tough resistance in Tawi Crossing area. 3 officers of the Bn are missing in action which itself speaks of the defences being overrun by the enemy forces. The counter attacks in repeated numbers were heavily inclined in Manpower strength towards enemy side. As a result, after repulsing the enemy counter attacks bravely, all the three companies defending areas were overrun by the enemy. When evacuation of dead and wounded was undertaken after the spells of counter attacks were over, it was discovered that Maj AK SURI, Capt KS Rathod and Capt Giri Raj Singh were not found in the company defences and enroute towards it. It was presumed that the officers had died in shelling and fierce action. Subsequently, the NOK of the officers were informed regarding their death and their on the spot cremation. This is the usual practice admist the heavy fog of war. Lesser known to anyone that the buck does not stop here.

Dr RS Suri F/O Maj AK Suri was skeptical of the account narrated to him and he started his search from MH located across the Indian Cantonments to 310 Field Hospital, Jaurian (J&K) where the wounded of 5 ASSAM were treated. Surprisingly, he found no record of his son in either dead or wounded in 310 FH, Jaurian. As per standard practice, in case of war autopsy and issue of Death Certificate is undertaken by Services Doctors and the report is later dispatched to NOK after

attestation from MH and CO of respective unit. Since 310 FH, Jaurian had no record of Maj AK Suri being brought dead or wounded, his father was left in doubt and agony never to end. 4 telegrams were received by Dr RS Suri which gave different dates of death of his son which further deepened the mystery behind.

As a result, Dr RS Suri decided to search for his son on his own initiative. Further when the belongings of Maj AK Suri were received at his home, his father discovered that the helmet of his son was not the correct size of his head, his engagement ring was not found in the trunk of belongings. This confirmed Dr Suri's apprehensions that something untoward had happened with his son. Dr RS Suri started searching for his son in his own capacity and later got confirmed news of his son being alive and in Pakistan's Custody.

On 21/12/1974, a handwritten note mentioning "I am quite OK here" reached Dr Suri's residence. The note bore the date 07/12/1972. In Jan-1972, Maj AK Suri's name surfaced at a radio program "Punjabi Darbar" on Radio Pakistan. On 13/08/1975, a handwritten note once again reached Dr Suri's residence in Faridabad. It was written from Karachi on bore the date 14-16<sup>th</sup> June, 1975. It was sent by Maj AK Suri, 5 ASSAM stating that he and 20 more officers are alive captured in Pakistan. Handwriting of Maj AK Suri was confirmed by handwriting experts. It served as the first evidence to Government of India regarding the presence of Indian Defence personnel in captivity of Pakistan and not repatriated after the end of war. These Defence personnel were earlier listed as Missing in Action presumed Killed in Action. However, after receipt of such evidences, Government of India restored their current status as Missing in Action & believed to be in captivity of Pakistan even after the end of war and Prisoners exchange(s) undertaken in 1972,1973,1974 & 1975. As a result of persistent efforts of NOK of the missing Defence personnel, evidences, Government of India tabled the list(s) of Missing Defence Personnel still in Pakistan's custody in Lok Sabha in the year 1979.

In the later years, it was reported that Maj AK Suri was not captured on 03<sup>rd</sup> Dec, 1971 when the war officially started. He was captured a day prior to it i.e. on 02<sup>nd</sup> Dec, 1971 due to shelling and later cross-border ambush. Such cross-border recce operations are carried out by both sides under the cover of Artillery fire. Maj AK Suri being wounded in shelling and cross-border ambush by SSG of Pakistan Army was quietly apprehended by the enemy.

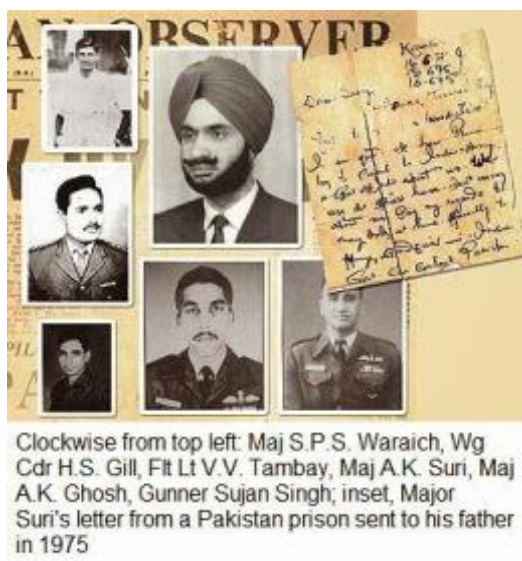
The release of Maj AK Suri was therefore not easy as he was placed under the category of security prisoners after levying him with espionage charges. This has always practiced by Pakistan to show regular Indian Armed Forces personnel as enlisted spies/intelligence agents to hide them from scrutiny of Indian Govt. and ICRC (International Red Cross Society). As a result, these officers were not included in Prisoners exchange list and they could not be repatriated to India.

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Pakistan always kept shifting Maj AK Suri across various locations of Prisons and detention centres across the length and breadth of Pakistan so that his whereabouts could not be traced. Being the first capture from Western Front, his return to India could have jeopardized sinister plans of Pakistan in handling of our war prisoners in an unethical manner.

Capt Kalyan Singh Rathod & Capt Giri Raj Singh both from 5 ASSAM were missing from their positions overrun by heavily outnumbered enemy counter attacks on from 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec, 1971 to 05<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. Both were later reported in captivity of Pakistan and met the same fate as Maj AK Suri.

This is the harsh reality of what happens in the cover of thick fog of war and the confusions arising from it.



Clockwise from top left: Maj S.P.S. Waraich, Wg Cdr H.S. Gill, Flt Lt V.V. Tambay, Maj A.K. Suri, Maj A.K. Ghosh, Gunner Sujan Singh; inset, Major Suri's letter from a Pakistan prison sent to his father in 1975

Karachi.  
14/6/75  
15/6/75  
16/6/75

Dear Dady  
I am quite ok here. Please  
try to contact to Indian Army  
or Govt of India about us. We  
are 20 officers here. Don't worry  
about me. Pay my regards to  
every body at home. Especially to  
Mummy, Grandfather - Indian  
Govt. Can contact Pakistan.

Maj.A.K.Suri's handwritten letter sent by him to his father from Karachi, Pakistan dt.14/06/1975 to 16/06/1975

### Spy and P.O.W. [Lives Overlap]

The initial 25 years after the end of the British Raj (1947-1972) was a period of intense cross-border intelligence operations in which the newly independent nations (India & Pakistan) were involved in intelligence warfare. The competition for gathering effective intelligence raced up at an exponentially rapid rate. On Indian side, erstwhile Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) on Pakistan Side were the main handlers responsible for protecting their nation(s) in a covert manner.

It is at this stage, mass recruitment of young men energetic, willing to serve the country and financially not so sound are in the watchful eye of Intelligence agencies. As a result, Intelligence agents are born out of simple young men from villages and cities having immense spirit of patriotism. Intelligence agencies duty bound by their mandate to select such young men and channelize their

spirit to serve the nation. After training them and assuring them well look after for their families, these intelligence agents are sent for collecting classified intelligence through cross-border intelligence & covert operations. The missions are extremely dangerous and a proper setup inside enemy territory for working receives them after crossing the border.

What falls everything in jeopardy if unfortunism when the intelligence cover is blown up and intelligence operatives are arrested by our adversary. Whenever cover is blown and spies are arrested, spells of very severe torture, captivity and levying of charges related to espionage, waging war against nation are levied and they are incarcerated in prisons. In Pakistan, Indian Intelligence agents are charged under various offences under Pak Army Act and are labelled as security prisoners. They are not charged under CPC/CrPC Acts admissible under Constitution of Pakistan for punishing civilian criminals. Pakistan Army has complete control over trial of security prisoners hence they are tried under Pakistan Army Act unlike in India where spies undergo trial as per CrPC/CPC in accordance with the Constitution of India.

Most of the Indian intelligence agents who were released from Pakistan in the era from 1988-2012 were held up before 1971 War broke out and were specifically sent to gather enemy plans. When they were released, interrogation during de-briefing was carried out by Indian Authorities. During the de-briefing, every spy has revealed that Indian Armed Forces personnel from 1965 & 1971 wars have been kept in secret detention centres, remote military camps, high security areas in prisons along with them at many instances. Specific stress was laid on their physical and mental condition and the category under which they are kept i.e. "Security Prisoners". It was due to the information given to Indian Authorities by the spies returning from Pakistan after repatriation that the list of "Missing 54" got further strengthened as the statements of Indian Spies were later verified by the Govt. using the covert machinery. Every intelligence agent has sworn an affidavit regarding the statement submitted to Govt. Of India during de-briefing after return from Pakistan.

Roshan Lal, Roop Lal, Mukhtiar Singh, Mohan Lal Bhaskar, Gopal Dass had been on some of the most dangerous covert missions in Pakistan when they were apprehended by Pakistani Intelligence Agencies. All of them have narrated the presence of Indian P.O.W.(s) under unlawful and secret detention. Mukhtiar Singh who was released in 1988 has confirmed the presence of many officers. He confirmed the presence of Maj AK Suri, Capt Ravinder Kaura, Flt Lt Babul Guha [Indo-Pak War 1965] and Fg Offr KL Malkani in Pakistan's captivity. He specifically emphasized on their frequent shifting from one prison to another. Kot Lakhpat Jail Lahore, Bahawalpur Jail, Multan Jail were the places he had spent his life as captive. All these officers were present in these prisons from 1981-1988. Further, he also confirmed the presence of Capt KSR athod and Capt Giriraj Singh as well in Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore.

Mohan Lal Bhaskar in his book "I was a spy for India" gave account of meeting 2/Lt. Paras Ram Sharma , 2/Lt Sudhir Mohan Sabharwal in 1974-75 at Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore. Both young officers were awaiting their repatriation to India. He also mentioned regarding meeting two officers of Pakistan Army namely Col.Shafi and Maj Ayaz Ahmed Sipra (2nd Punjab Regiment of Pak Army) at Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore. They revealed that while they were held up in prison inside infamous Attock Fort for conspiring and overthrowing ZA Bhutto from power under a plan for coup but convicted by Gen Zia-Ul-Haq, President of Pakistan, COAS (Pakistan Army) & Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) of Pakistan from 1976-1988. These officers had befriended a very senior pilot of IAF [ "A Gill of IAF" as they used a phrase] indicating Wg Cdr HS Gill in Attock Fort in 1973. Attock Fort in Pakistan is controlled by SSG of Pakistan Army and earns a bad repute since no Indian detained inside Attock Fort has come out alive after being incarcerated.

Spies like Ghulam Hussain, Iqbal Hussain have reported the presence of Fg Offr Sudhir Tyagi at an interrogation centre in Shahi Qila, Lahore and Maj KJS Sandhu at Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore respectively. Fg Offr Sudhir Tyagi was seen in 1973 and Maj KJS Sandhu in 1973-76 period. Maj JS Sandhu was reported in handicapped condition (one arm lost) and facing spying charges following conviction under Pakistan Army Act which generally was imprisonment for life. Presence of Sub Assa Singh was also reported by these spies on returning to India. Sub Assa Singh was detained by Pakistan's Field Intelligence Units [FIU] and his news of being alive was confirmed in 1998-2001 period.

Mukhtiar Singh when lodged in Multan Jail in 2001 alongwith Ravindra Kaushik also known as "Black Tiger" had reported presence of Capt Giriraj Singh detained alongwith. Capt Giriraj Singh was in Multan Jail from 1989-2001 period and he used to share the stories of his native place and his child with Mukhtiar Singh and Ravindra Kaushik. He died in Multan Jail in 2001 and buried alongside Ravindra Kaushik in Multan Jail graveyard.

Another spy named Amrik Singh who was repatriated to India in 1988 revealed the presence of Maj AKGhosh in Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore in 1988. He was rendered insane during the course of torturous interrogation by Pakistan's FIU [Field Intelligence Unit]. He was repatriated alongwith Amrik Singh in 1988 to India but was not accepted by Indian Authorities on Wagah Border Check Post due to his unsound mental state. He was sent back to Pakistani prison in Lahore and languished thereafter in enemy's captivity. This wrong step in cross-checking the identity of our missing defence personnel during prisoner exchange program in 1988 proved to be a blunder. We as a nation lost golden chance to bring back our missing defence personnel. Maj AK Ghosh if cross-checked after contacting Army HQ or his unit 15 Rajput could have turned the table towards our side. This did not

occur and Pakistan's cover of lie could not be blown off. Brother of Maj AK Ghosh had also identified him in TIME Magazine after 1971 war.

Flt Lt VV Tambay has been seen in Lahore Interrogation Centre & Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore from 1978-1988 by Mukhtiar Singh. A Bangladeshi Naval Officer who was detained in Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore during 1971 war as a Bengali origin cadet war happened to see Flt Lt VV Tambay in a cell scribbling his name on the wall. In 1984, when he went to India for a professional course, he narrated the incident to Smt Dayamati Tambay W/O Flt Lt VV Tambay. Mrs. Tambay confirmed her husband's facial identity having scar on his chin. The Bangladeshi Naval Officer had seen Flt Lt Tambay's face covered with thick beard with a scar on his chin. In 1989, Sh. Jayant Jatar, uncle of Flt.V.V.Tambay went to Pakistan for sports tournament. The then Governor of Punjab, Gen Tikka Khan was requested to him regarding the plea to show him his nephew which was the last wish of Flt Lt Tambay's ailing grandmother. Gen Tikka Khan surprisingly agreed and took Sh Jatar to an unknown detention centre some 150 Kms from Lahore blindfolded in an Army jeep. When his blindfold was removed, he was standing in front of a cell where he saw a man with slight long hair, spotting a stubble of beard, wearing a Bengali kurta pyjama. He looked normal in behavior and movements reading a newspaper.

Sh.Jatar recognized his nephew immediately and tried to bring his attention by coughing and showing his Indian National Team Crest blazer. However, he was not allowed to speak to Flt Lt VV Tambay and was taken out by the security personnel stationed there.

Unfortunately, spies if apprehended by the enemy are abandoned by their handlers. When they return, after completion of interrogation under de-briefing process, no one cares about them. As a result, their statements could not move the Govt. much. Spies and War prisoners faced similar charges in Pakistan for their stellar role in foiling sinister plans of enemy and repulsing enemy counter attacks in their respective roles in safeguarding our nation. Their lives certainly overlapped for very long time spanning two-three decades.

### **Pattern Noticed in Reporting of Cases**

In my research work, I have spotted a pattern developed by logical analysis after extensively researching on this subject for more than 16 years. The pattern noticed by me is related to reporting of captured personnel, confirmation of their status by own side as well as by enemy side and the pace by which their status is tracked.

In case of Army personnel in the missing list, nearly all of them are missing after facing a heavily outnumbered attack/counter-attack. At certain posts consisting of a platoon/section or a

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position defended by a company, after few days of attack when headcount check was undertaken, missing soldiers were ascertained. In war, black smoke of ammunition hold an iron curtain sometimes. It is generally believed that in heavy shelling, a certain officer may have died. This has been evident in Forward Observation Officers from Artillery who were tasked to provide cover to Infantry and pin-point accurate artillery fire on enemy. Many officers were especially captured when fierce attack was at its peak and while their close aids like wireless operators were heavily injured not fully conscious. That's why accurate detailing of what happened to missing officers from their wireless operators could not be ascertained clearly in initial stages.

Due to multiple counter attacks faced by our troops in Western Front especially Chhamb Sector, majority of Indian Army Officers who went missing in action were later found to be alive in Pakistan's custody after 2-3 years of war. Maj AK Suri, Maj AK Ghosh, Maj SPS Waraich, Maj KJS Sandhu, Capt KS Rathod, Capt Giri Raj Singh, Capt Ravinder Kaura, Lt Vijay Kumar Azad, Capt Kamal Bakshi, 2/Lt Paras Ram Sharma, 2/Lt Sudhir Mohan Sabharwal, Sub Assa Singh are the prominent testimonies of such capture taken by enemy after fierce & heavily outnumbered counter attacks.

Capt Kamal Bakshi & Sub Assa Singh were captured from Chhamb Jaurian Sector in a similar way when their post named "303 post" was completely razed off in enemy counter attack. Artillery cover could not be provided in time, both the company commander & platoon commander from 5 SIKH were heavily injured and quietly apprehended by the enemy in a state when they were not in a position to offer much resistance to the enemy. When the defending company arrived at post 303, all dead bodies were seen but no trace of Capt Kamal Bakshi & Sub Assa Singh was recovered. It simply denoted that the capture had been undertaken by the enemy especially of the company & the platoon commander. The last radio intercept with the Battalion HQ by Capt Kamal Bakshi also stated 'Enemy is just 50 yards away. We need artillery fire support. We are fighting till last breath but are heavily outnumbered. Please convey message to my wife that.....'. After that there was an explosion and contact was disrupted with post 303 of 5 Sikh. Enemy had taken over the post 303 on 5<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971 and our officer & JCO went missing since their whereabouts could not be ascertained when headcount was done after reinforcements arrived on 07<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971 and enemy was repulsed back by the other companies of 5 SIKH after receiving artillery fire and proper link up with other units.

In case of IAF personnel, ascertaining of fate of pilots becomes more difficult as their aircrafts are shot down and their comrades have to make a swift return after carrying out air-raid. When their aircrafts are shot down especially during dusk, ejection flash is visible but condition of pilot who ejects out cannot be ascertained clearly by returning pilots due to thick black smoke coming out

from aircraft shot down and the paucity of time to return back after carrying out the mission successfully.

Flt Lt VV Tambay was reported killed on the same day by his squadron pilots who accompanied him in Shorkot Airfield raid on 05<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. His wingman Flt Lt Jimmy Bhatia (Later Air Marshal AOC-In-C Western Air Command) reported his eye witness account as Flt Lt Tambay's aircraft being shot down by Anti-Aircraft fire and his no response to Flt Lt Bhatia's message to him on radio " Uncle, eject."

Uncle was the call sign of Flt Lt VV Tambay. During dusk, darkness prevailed fully due to Dec month hence visually Flt Lt Tambay's ejection could not be ascertained properly. His aircraft exploded later. As a result, the returning head count was reported as minus one after air raid on Shorkot Air Field on 05<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. Flt Lt Tambay was subsequently declared as killed in action. However, a Pakistani Newspaper "The Observer" reported capture of the officer on 05<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. This news was even read by his wife Mrs. Dayamati Tambay in India on 06<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. This resulted in chasing of the matter by officer's wife and he was later declared as missing in action.

Normally, it is assumed that when aircraft explodes pilot is assumed to have died. However, the capture of Flt Lt VV Tambay proved the pre-assumed notion otherwise. In certain cases, aircraft disintegrates after explosion and the portion containing cockpit is often recovered at some distance from the main body's wreckage of aircraft. The pilot inside is deeply injured and incapacitated due to heavy smoke inside the cockpit in case ejection has not been successful. It is at this moment when enemy patrol inspects the wreckage, pilot is found injured and is quietly apprehended by the enemy since he is not in a position to offer much resistance to captors being severely wounded. Some of the IAF pilots like Flt Lt Parulkar, Sqn Ldr DS Jaffa, Wg Cdr Cohello who were lodged in Lyallpur Provost Camp were shown the helmet of Flt Lt VV Tambay which had 'TOMBOY' painted on it. PAF showed this helmet to these captured IAF pilots because of similarity in surname 'Tambay'. However, in order to maintain secrecy of the sister squadron and safety of the brother officer, they did not identify the helmet in order to protect him. Later when Indian P.O.W.(s) lodged in Lyallpur Provost Camp were repatriated in 1972 following a failed escape attempt by Flt Lt Parulkar, they mentioned about Flt.Lt Tambay during de-briefing to Indian authorities. As a result, Flt Lt VV Tambay's status as missing in action believed to be captured was further strengthened.

Other pilots like Flt Lt GS Rai, Fg Offr KS Malkani & Fg Offr Sudhir Tyagi of 27 Sqn met the same fate as of Flt Lt VV Tambay. These pilots were part of the air raid team to attack Murid Air Base from 03<sup>rd</sup> Dec to 05<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971. All of them were presumed dead after their aircrafts were shotdown. However, their presence was later confirmed by returning Indian spies in 1988 during their spells of interrogation at Shahi Qila, Lahore throughout 1970s and 80s era. Flt Lt GS Rai was

seen captured in wounded condition on BBC Television by sister of the officer residing in London during 1971. Similar pattern is applicable to Jet Bomber Convoy Units (JBCU) on bombing mission across the Border deep inside enemy territory on specific targets like Railway Stations in Pakistan, Ammunition depots, Anti-Aircraft Gun positions to name a few. When bomber aircraft is shot down by Anti-Aircraft fire, Bomber plane being heavy and large sized as compared to Fighter Jets and Interceptor Prototypes do not disintegrate easily. Wreckage of Bombers have many injured personnel inside. Their capture is very easy for enemy forces especially when buried under wreckage. This applies for pilots and navigators of JBCU(s) namely Flt Lt RM Advani, Flt Lt Manohar Purohit, Flt Lt SC Mahajan, Flt Lt SC Sandal, Flt Lt LM Sasoon, Flt Lt SK Goswami and Flt Lt KS Nanda. Chances are not bleak that crew can be seriously injured not dead as always assumed after an aircraft is shot down.

Sqn Ldr MK Jain & Fg Offr KP Murlidharan are even acknowledged by PAF. for their gallant air combat and have confirmed in their briefing to P.A.F Higher HQ(s) that these Indian pilots were intercepted on returning from hitting designated targets located North-West of Peshawar. Our IAF pilots gave a tough fight to PAF Pilots. It was only a matter of a few milliseconds in locking each other as target that both our air warriors were shot down. PAF pilots eye-witness account revealed that after being shot down, both the IAF pilots dragged their aircraft towards hilly side of Peshawar and tried to bail out before exploding at the hills. They could not be seen ejecting but their presence in Attock Fort & Shahi Qila being detained by enemy turned the tables around.

Pakistan took advantage of the situation when Indian Side declared the soldiers as killed in action. Pakistan side knew that these personnel were alive but concealed the truth from Indian authorities. This gave an open hand to our adversary to exploit the situation and make the presence of these men untraceable. Radio broadcasts were the only reliable source of information in those days as television sets were not so prominent. Announcements of capture were deliberately conveyed through radio on the orders of Pakistan Govt. It is pertinent to note that the NOK of these personnel gave news to Indian Govt. regarding the names of captured personnel announced on radio. Further, information of capture ought to have been passed to other side through proper channel signal exchange relay system. The unit that captures a soldier passes the information through proper channel to higher formation HQ(s). This information is then passed to the other side. Sadly, Pakistan conducted the information exchange in a very unethical manner unworthy of a Regular professionally and morally upright Army.

Normally, captured personnel are interrogated by the respective services intelligence agencies. However, in Pakistan's Intelligence Setup joint working of three services is seen in large proportions due to their initial training by US Intelligence Agency CIA. As a result, after brief

interrogation by Pakistan Army Intelligence or PAF Intelligence as applicable to captured to Indian Army/IAF personnel during the initial stage of capture, the captured Indian Armed Forces personnel were handed over to Field Intelligence Units [F.I.U.] of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. They are known for their highly cruel methods of torture and have full fledged interrogation and detention centres in Sialkot, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, Karachi, Attock, Mardan, Bahawalpur, Sukkur, Sahiwal, Kohat, Quetta & Peshawar. Every Indian Intelligence agent and War prisoner were first interrogated in the most brutal way and then sent to various prisons or interrogation centres. It is the I.S.I. which decides the nature of charges to be levied on Indian Security prisoners as per Pakistan Army Act. Since, these 54 Indian War prisoners were treated as Security Prisoners (Spies), their treatment as per Geneva Convention was impossible. Moreover, I.S.I. made sure that their repatriation becomes extremely difficult by lodging them alongwith Indian Spies.

The moment our soldiers were handed over to Pakistan's FIU, their safety and whereabouts were difficult to ascertain by International Red Cross, Amnesty International, & Govt. Of India. Continuous denial of presence of our men in captivity by Pakistan is clear indication of wicked approach being applied. Moreover, Indian Bodies like International Red Cross Society, Amnesty International could not do much as an iron curtain had been carefully placed before their eyes by Pakistan. Denying access to them for visiting various places like Detention centres, Interrogation centres, specific areas inside Pakistani prisons and showing them only ordinary civilian prisoners lodged in prisons is a testimony to cleverly devised camouflage of lies and deceit by Pakistan.

Till 1979, Indian P.O.W.(s) were never kept in open courtyard of Pakistani prisons alongwith civilian prisoners. They were kept in secret areas of high security where no access is applicable to any outsider. Only when International Red Cross left Pakistan, these P.O.W.(s) were sent to Civil Prisons. Govt. of Pakistan under the leadership of Gen. Zia-Ul-Haq made sure that after passing of every decade after 1971 war, recognition of these P.O.W.(s) would become difficult owing to ill-treatment and long spells of torture. Since no International Body would be available after 1979 in Pakistan, the chances of any checks in any prison or detention centre will remain bleak. Pakistan took complete advantage of this situation knowing very well that no International Body is now present to keep an eye on them.

### **Pakistan's Blunder**

The first and foremost blunder committed by Pakistan is that it has always denied presence of any Indian P.O.W.(s) detained in its captivity. The insult resulting from defeat in 1971 followed by surrender of 93,000 Pakistani Armed Forces personnel in Eastern Front was not taken well after the end of war by Pakistan. Wrongly channeled vengeance resulting in mishandling of this sensitive matter. The search by Indian families for their loved ones in Pakistani prisons in 1983, early 1990s

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and last in 2007 yielded nothing because everything was concealed under watchful eyes of I.S.I. Due to ingrained habit of telling lies and doing deceitful plans, we cannot expect any honest approach from Pakistan. During visit to Pakistani prisons in 1983 & 2007, relatives Of Indian P.O.W.(s) noted that in any prison across the length & breadth of Pakistan no entry of original name of Indian Armed Forces personnel was available in prison diary. All the records were written in Urdu which was not understood by NOK of our soldiers. I.S.I. had deliberately twisted their names and identity and instructed the Police & Jail authorities not to document the entry & exit of Indian war prisoners. Had Police & Jail authorities in Pakistan documented the particulars, the war prisoners had to be kept along with civilian detainees in prisons, Indian War prisoners could have been identified by International Red Cross & Amnesty International during their search in Pakistani jails. The very identity of our war prisoners was tormented, neutralized and vandalized to such an extent that identification & tracing them became next to impossible. Interrogators were strictly ordered to threat war prisoners of death in captivity and forceful conversion to Islam so that they could not attempt any escape or send any written proof of their presence in Pakistan to Indian. The spirit of our soldiers is worth saluting. They fought even unarmed through their will and grit. They still managed to send their whereabouts through letters and messages to spies returning to India(as in case of Capt. Ravinder Kaura/39 Medium Regiment). It is due to the letters sent by Maj. A.K. Suri/5 ASSAM and statements of returning Indian intelligence agents , foulplay of Pakistan was discovered.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was lodged in Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore in 1977 following his arrest by newly established Martial Law Government headed by Gen Zia-UI-Haq. Gen Zia-UI-Haq had seized power on 05<sup>th</sup> July, 1977 following a bloodless military coup codenamed “ Operation Fairplay”. ZA Bhutto was arrested on the charges of murdering his political opponent Ahmed Raza Kasuri While he was serving sentence, he faced traumatic experience of waking up at night after listening to screams of some prisoners lodged in adjacent barrack. He enquired the matter through his legal counsel from Jail Authorities. It was there he came to know that the screaming prisoners were Indian Soldiers who were captured alive in 1971 and had been rendered insane during interrogation process. When his daughter Benazir Bhutto assumed power in 1988, she told the entire narrative to the then Prime Minister of India Sh. Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 and assured resolving the matter. However, when Pakistan started insurgency in J&K to liberate Kashmir from India, the entire attitude of Benazir Bhutto made a U-Turn. In 1991, during dialogue between both nations, she denied the presence of Indian P.O.W.(s) in Pakistan to Sh. Narsimha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India. Sh. Narsimha Rao had worked very hard to secure release of Indian war prisoners from 1980-83 when he was Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs.

From 1991, Pakistan developed a complete plan for bleeding India with a thousand cuts. Therefore, no progress occurred on this sensitive matter. This was followed by Siachen Skirmishes

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(1993-95) period, Kargil War (1999) and Indo-Pak Military standoff in 2001 aftermath of attack on Indian Parliament. In 1998-99 period, Sub.Assa Singh had tried to smuggle letter to India while still under interrogation by Pakistani F.I.U. He was beaten very badly. This was testified by an Indian National from RS Pura lodged in Kot Lakhpat Jail, Lahore facing spying charges after he was arrested by Pakistani Govt. due to illegal border crossing in 1991.

Gen. Pervez Musharraf had seized power on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1999 when he was removed from office by then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on failure of Kargil War and concealing of relevant facts from Elected Civilian Govt regarding the execution of military plans in Kargil. Gen. Zia-Ud-Din Khan was appointed as new Army Chief of Pakistan.

Gen Musharraf was on Sri Lanka tour. He was denied landing in Islamabad. However, he with Army officers loyal to him landed in Karachi and took control of all airports in Pakistan and declared himself as President of Pakistan following a bloodless coup. Nawaz Sharif was arrested and later exiled to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Gen.Musharraf always had a deep hatred towards India right from the day of his commissioning in Pakistan Army. As SSG Commando, he lead frontal attack in Lahore sector in Indo-Pak War, 1965 followed by action in Chamb Sector in Indo-Pak War, 1971. However, the surrender of Pakistan in 1971 followed by creation of Bangladesh made him a man full of revenge and vengeance towards Indian Army. In 1984, as Siachen Brigade Commander, he convinced the then COAS and President Gen. Zia-UI-Haq to occupy lower ridges of Siachen namely Baltoro Ridge to cut off Ladakh from Kashmir. Indian Army launched "OP.MEGHDOOT" in April-1984. Pakistan Army's plans were defeated blatantly and Gen. Musharraf could not digest this defeat. Later in 1998, when he was appointed COAS and was mastermind of Kargil debacle.

In Aug-2001, Gen.Musharraf was invited to India for talks in Agra on the occasion of Indo-Pak Summit. The then Prime Minister of India Sh.Atal Bihari Vajpayee had taken up the matter with Gen.Musharraf. He cleverly denied the presence of Indian Prisoners of War in Pakistan's captivity in front of Media during talks in Indo-Pak summit. He even promised to conduct a thorough search in Pakistani prisons again which was going to be a futile exercise due to well staged camouflage of lies already staged by Pakistan Army since 1977. As a result, NOK of Indian P.O.W.(s) returned empty handed in 2007 after visiting Pakistani jails.

In 1974, women/spouses of Pakistani Armed Forces personnel lodged in India as P.O.W.(s) created hysteria by conducting worldwide demonstrations in Pakistani embassies all around the world to demand their release. This had gained wide attention of media in those times. Ironically, when families of our captured personnel visited Pakistan in 1983 for the first time to search for their loved ones, they were not accorded the deserving compassion and assistance. Their time was wasted intentionally by making them visit Civil Jails.

Similar events happened in 2007 when NOK of our soldiers visited Pakistan. They were surprised to observe that their visit was being snooped out. The reign of Gen Zia-Ul-Haq (1977-1988) holds the key for masterminding such moves. Gen. Zia-Ul-Haq had also developed hatred and vengeance towards India following balkanization of Pakistan in 1971. The entire proxy war policy was developed under his brainwork. He made sure that during his military regime, Indian War prisoners could not breathe in open air. He had specifically ordered I.S.I. to punish 54 Indian Armed Forces personnel for foiling their heavily outnumbered counter-attacks. Interrogators were directed to try everything possible to extract the tactics used by junior leaders of Indian Armed Forces. Everything was tried to tempt & torment them in shape of torture from all dimensions-physically, mentally, emotionally. Nothing could break our soldier's determination. They decided to suffer instead of moral degradation of cheating their nation and forces. Till date, this criminal folly is continuing in Pakistan. No Govt. whether Military or Democratically elected one pays any heed to Indian Govt. dossiers sent to seek release of Indian Prisoners of War. This is because the entire matter is under watchful eyes of Pakistan Army/ISI which dominates Pakistan.

It is pertinent to note that Pakistan has made certain nations like Oman to join this criminal folly. Oman had facilitated Pakistan by allowing transfer of some of Indian P.O.W.(s) to Masirah Island which is used as a Military Base by Oman and is often a test bed for joint military exercises between Oman & Pakistan. In 2008-2012 period, Indian carpenters working in Oman under an agency were hired for carrying out necessary repairs in Masirah Island Base. There an Indian Carpenter met a man dressed as a muslim but speaking punjabi. He disclosed his identity as Sep. Jaspal Singh/15 Punjab captured on 04<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1971 during attack on Hussainiwala near Ferozepur alongwith Maj. S.P.S. Waraich & Maj. K.J.S. Sandhu. He confessed being sent to Oman in 1978 along with some other war prisoners. This entire episode was narrated by the Punjabi origin carpenter to family of Sep. Jaspal Singh and swore an affidavit for his statement to Govt. of India. However, on contacting Govt. of Oman regarding the matter similar U-turn & denial was faced by Indian authorities. Therefore, further progress could not be carried out. Pakistan has committed international blunder by violating Geneva Convention.

### **What may be the Present Condition Now?**

Extreme mental agony, pain and depression currently resided in minds of these P.O.W.(s) left abandoned for lifetime. Many of them are in bad physical state and mental condition due to prolonged detention and isolation. Their real names have been twisted and identity destroyed by captors long ago in order to deprive them of any clue for rescue. Forceful conversion to Islam by the captors and taking up muslim names or aliases cannot be ruled out. More than 5 decades have passed since the end of Indo-Pak War, 1971. Faces of Indian P.O.W.(s) have undergone massive

changes which will certainly make their recognition difficult. A dedicated follow up by Indian Intelligence network in cross-border operative role to trace the present state of our Indian P.O.W.(s) whatever be their state today dead or alive. Psychological blow of being treated as a security prisoner even after a crystal clear fact present of being a prisoner of war is highly damaging and irreparable. They have not been able to cope up with such inhuman treatment and unending wait for return to their motherland which has taken a heavy toll on their physical as well as mental well being. Those still alive will be old, sick, hopeless in dire need of care. P.O.W.(s) who have died while being in incarceration in Pakistan's captivity bore the brunt of poor hygiene, ill-effects of torture, lack of medical attention & mental tormentation at its peak. These are the only reasons for custodial death of some of our war prisoners who were otherwise extremely fit tested by war when in their services.

### **What can be Done Now?**

This entire matter needs to be chased sincerely till justice is delivered to our soldiers and to their families. This will require strong political will with resolute action. Various Govt. agencies ranging from Intelligence Network, External Affairs Ministry, Defence Ministry & Armed Forces working in close co-ordination & cohesion with each other.

After writing and submitting my findings to Higher Authorities in Govt. ranging from Military Officers, Bureaucratic appointments and Cabinet Ministers since 2013, I have submitted a detailed draft of setting up Prisoners of War Division in AFHQ(s) which will co-ordinate with National Intelligence & Security Grid and extract more detailed & accurate information of our War prisoners. This information will be relayed to External Affairs Ministry which in turn can present strong case to Pakistani Govt. Since Pakistan always denies their existence through masterminding by I.S.I, this strategy can be neutralized by joint setup of Armed Forces, Intelligence Agencies and Ministries in this regard. This suggestion presented as a detailed draft has been accepted as a valuable input by Air HQ (Air Operations Directorate) during my meeting in this regard with Director General Air Operations in Oct-2023.

We need to let go of old thinking of treating Prisoners of War as a used ammunition round or a small portion of wide collateral damage. Indian Prisoners of War still languishing in Pakistan are a testimony of never ending will power. Abandoning them forever will be detrimental for morale of the Nation & Armed Forces. Everytime this matter is followed up, the probability of all prisoners being dead arises and further follow up gets weakened. This requires re-thinking. It is our duty to bring back all the war prisoners whatever be their state till date. Those who have died in Pakistan's captivity, their mortal remains are still with Govt. Of Pakistan. Recovering them tactfully is our responsibility. India has helped U.S., Japan & other various European nations in recovering the

mortal remains of their soldiers killed in 2<sup>nd</sup> World War in Indian sub-continent. Now, the time has come to help ourselves too.

Freedom is not easy to earn and more difficult to preserve. These brave souls have spent their entire life protecting nation's integrity even in incarceration in prisons of Pakistan.

It is our duty now to do something concrete for them. The pain and agony faced by them & their families should end now and forever.

## Notes:

1. Ajay Banerjee "The Missing 54" article in Spectrum-The Tribune Newspaper dt. 17/12/2006.
2. Faith Johnston "Four Miles to Freedom- Escape from a Pakistani POW Camp" book.
3. Mohan Lal Bhaskar (Former Intelligence Agent) "An Indian Spy in Pakistan" book.
4. Roop Lal (Former Intelligence Agent) "Pakistan Return from Pakistan's Gallows" (Hindi Translation) book.
5. Chander Suta Dogra "Missing in Action-The Prisoners who never came back."
6. Kishorilal Sharma "My Years in a Pakistani Prison-The Untold story of Kishorilal alias Amrik Singh alias Saleem, an Indian Spy in Pakistan" book.
7. Cdr Manan Bhatt (Retd) "Balakot Air-Strike- How India Avenged Pulwama" Book Chapter- "Tomar Badi Kothay" & Appendix-V "The Missing 54".