

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



OPERATION CACTUS MALDIVES

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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Operation CACTUS was the code name of the successful intervention by the Indian Armed Forces in support of the duly elected government of Maldives, headed by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. The Government was attempted to be overthrown by a businessman, Abdullah Luthufi, who had secured the services of a breakaway group of Sri Lankan Tamils of PLOTE (Peoples' Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam). The Group had parted ways with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in Sri Lanka which was fighting the Sri Lankan Government due to internecine rivalry between Prabhakaran, fighting for a separate Tamil Eelam, and PLOTE Leader, Uma Maheshwaran. In exchange for help, the Rebel Leader Luthufi is reported to have promised Uma Maheshwaran a base-cum-sanctuary. The Rebel Group set course from Sri Lanka on Night 31 October/01 November, 1988, in three fishing trawlers,

entered Maldivian waters in proximity of Male and hijacked two fishing boats going to the Sea around 0230 hours early morning on 03 November 1988. They landed in Male on the jetty usually used for ferry between Male and Hulhule close to the National Security Service Headquarters around 0330 hours and, simultaneously, at the commercial harbour located West of Male, disembarked quickly and headed towards town and soon, thereafter, were in control of the Radio Station and TV Station. They attacked the NSS HQ and were heard firing at various places; Presidential security team moved President Gayoom and his Family to another house some distance away and the Deputy Defence Minister also went into hiding.

Maldives sent out distress calls for help to India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Pakistan, US and UK – Pakistan expressed their inability but others, though willing were

in no position to render timely assistance or without someone else supplementing them in terms of air transportation or naval support. PM Rajiv Gandhi's office had been called by Mrs Aneesa Ahmed, the President's Secretary, and the Foreign Secretary, Ibrahim Zaki, soon thereafter. Mrs Aneesa Ahmad then called and spoke to Mr Sachidanand, the Acting High Commissioner, also followed by a call by Mr Zaki. Mr Sachidanand in turn called Mr Kuldip Sahdev, the Joint Secretary, BSM Division in Ministry of External Affairs who had already received a call from Mr Sachidanand. The Latter also, subsequently, called Mr Arun Banerjee, our High Commissioner in Maldives, then in Delhi on leave. Information about the rebels was sketchy; later some additional details came to Mr Ronen Sen, the Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, from Zaki. Kuldeep Sahdev had activated Army Air and Vice Chiefs. We in the Para Brigade were told to get a move on by about 1000 hours on 03 Nov 1988.

Morning of 03 Nov 1988 was a bit nippy – I had had a late night doing the things of night training that the armies of the world do, got up for morning PT and reached my office thereafter – I had looked at the parerwork and gone and finished a round of the training area to head back to office when I got a call from the BM, Maj (later Lt Gen) Vinod Bhatia to head to Brigade HQ forthwith and it could be something operational. I did precisely that and as I reached the HQ around 1015, it appeared as if everyone was waiting for me. I was ushered into the Commander's office where Brig FFC Bulsara, asked me if I knew where Maldives was. I told him

affirmative and he started telling me that there was a coup in Maldives. Indian help had been sought and we would help. I was to mobilize a company immediately to reach the Air Force Station to be ready to take off at 1230. Fortunately, it gave me an opportunity to withdraw a company under Maj Umed Singh deployed at COD, Agra, for guard duties following blasts in the Ammunition Depot at Jabbalpur a couple of months earlier. I withdrew the company and had also ordered Rupinder Dhillon's C Coy to get ready and move to 44 Sqn (IL-76). I had been told that we should be prepared to stay for up to three days in Trivandrum and will get further orders for induction into Maldives in parachute assault, airlanding, helilanding or sea landing mode. Between 100-500 rebels, who had arrived in a red mother ship, were reported to be operating between the Ship and Male, the Capital Island. They were said to be in control of installations considered most important in the given circumstances, in Male, the Telephone Exchange and Radio and TV stations.

I returned to the Battalion and, as a precaution, told both Rupinder (C Coy) and Umed (D Coy) to get their companies ready with Rupinder, straight away and soonest when ready to arrive NO LATER THAN 1230 at the Air Force Station and send a party to draw parachutes. Umed was told to stand by till further orders. As I finished briefing the two company commanders I was asked to return to the Bde HQ and told that I was to take two companies and tentage too. Speed was possible because D Coy had the ammunition while on COD duty. In my Battalion, the first line equivalent of training ammunition of all small arms was always

held in the Battalion and not the magazine albeit in contravention of all existing instructions on storage of ammunition. I also had my annual weapons, vehicles and instruments inspection in progress which I ordered wound up.

Commander gave me the following instructions at 1220 hours approximately – be prepared to undertake para assault of Male with a company while the remaining battalion was to build up by sea or air - para assault or helicopter landing. The task also envisaged landing at the airport if in friendly hands and progress operations with a view to rescue the President and ensure that he was safe, secure a beach head and, thereafter build up the rest of the Battalion being airlanded at Hulule to commence clearance of rebels in Male while the remainder Brigade builds up. There was to be no deviation from earlier plan viz halt at Trivandrum if drop was not possible or airport under hostile control. I was told that take off would be at 1530. I told the Commander that my Battalion was at almost 65% strength being in the normal peace time mode and returned to the Battalion. These instructions had been passed on to the Adjutant on phone and Rupinder, I found, was already in the Air Force Station and some of his men had headed to draw the parachutes.

As I was heading to the Air Force Station, I was diverted to the Brigade HQ again, told that A Coy 3 PARA was placed under command my Battalion and I was to secure the Hulule Airport and all its important installations soonest after landing in whichever mode. Rupinder was told by me to progress operations further to Male to rescue the President while D Coy less

a platoon of that Company would be given to Rupinder to take over the Male Beach Head. A Coy 3 PARA was tasked to hold the Eastern side of the Runway. Remainder Brigade was to build up at the airfield with 3 PARA who would reinforce me on arrival. Third Battalion (7 PARA) helping mop up at Male and elsewhere.

Please note that we were now onto a Brigade task from just a company airborne assault.

Rupinder and Umed had married up at the 44 Squadron Area by about 1300 hours. The Para Assault was to be carried out by 70 paratroopers of C Coy under Rupinder to capture the Airfield for further airlanding. I had decided to go with them and was quite sure that the Commander too would.

Please note that we had no occasion to interact with the Air Force Station or 44 Squadron till then who had received their telephonic warning order at about 0700 as against us in the Parachute Brigade being told only at around 1000 hrs. Air Force, who had been initially told to keep three aircraft ready at three hrs notice were on standby at one hours' notice now, since been upgraded to one hour without being told that a direct landing or airdrop at Male was being envisaged.

I reached 44 Squadron Area around 1315 hours or thereabout – Rupinder and Umed were both there with their companies who they were briefing. We had a further briefing session and I told them to carry out a rehearsal by interaction and tasking of the platoon and section commanders.

The Commander, accompanied by Maj Vinod Bhatia and his support personnel in a

mini Tactical Group, reached 44 Squadron around 1430 hours. We were told that a team from Delhi is on the way and they would give us additional inputs and discuss the plan. The Team arrived at 1530 hours. It comprised of Brig VP Malik (later COAS) from Military Operations Directorate and Group Captain (later AOC-in-C Central Air Comd) Ashok Goyal, Director (Transport and Helicopters) accompanied by Mr Arun Kumar Banerjee, The Indian High Commissioner in Maldives. They started telling us that the plan was to drop the paratroopers at Male in a ground which from a paratroopers or aviators point of view is the size of a handkerchief whereas the drop zone usually used for an IL-76 is, at the barest minimum, 2 kms by 1 km. At this point of time, Brig Bulsara looked at me, I gave him a negative by waving my head and so did Group Captain Bewoor. We rejected the drop option in unison and opted to land. We were also given the alternate plan to drop at the runway at Hulule or Male Football Ground which option too was ruled out. At this stage, Brig Bulsara moved up and requested Brig Malik to sit down and gave out his plan which was to land at Hulule and progress operations. A line diagram of Male was on the board but as soon as the briefing was coming to close, Banerjee came up to Bewoor and told him that the Line Diagram was that of Gan, a former British Base, some 400 kms South of Male at the Southern tip of Maldives. He gave us the CACTUS operational bible, a tourist book which had beautiful pictures of President Gayoom, Hulule Runway and Male. The tourist book, which was so late in its availability to the ground troops, could have been given to us in a timely manner if a little effort had been made. Needless

to say it was available in Delhi in many book stores and on the Connaught Place pavements but no effort seems to have been made to get a few copies for us at Agra.

I understand that the former Parachute Brigade Commander, Brig Vivek Sapatanekar, who was a DDG in MO Dte, had been summoned into the Operations Room by the then VCOAS (later COAS), Lt Gen SF Rodrigues. When asked about the feasibility of para drop, Brig Sapatanekar had advised that, optimistically speaking, 40-60% paratroopers would go into the Indian Ocean. The drop had been ruled out in Delhi. I often wonder whether it was a brain child of the Team during the flight from Delhi to Agra in pursuit of glory or, more logically perhaps and giving them the benefit of doubt, rejection of the para drop was done in MO Directorate when the Team was enroute to Agra.

In the mean time, 44 Squadron had told us that while three aircraft were available, we should fit ourselves into two aircraft. That created considerable and avoidable confusion which could have certainly been eliminated if Parachute Brigade had been warned early enough or 44 Squadron were told that they would be inducting us; we would have got together and not wasted the time we did in the confusion. This also created confusion with regard to loading of the aircraft whereby we had to carry logistics load of rations, ammunition and some tentage in the lead aircraft which presented its own problems at the time of operational disembarkation; my troops had moved off to secure the Hulhule Airport in Maldives but stores and extra ammunition were still

in the aircraft on my orders – this occurred because the orders for staging through Trivandrum with a possible halt there had remained unchanged and the number of aircraft was reduced. The confusion on ground regarding the number of aircraft and their flight sequence, unknown to us, had also catalysed the confusion further because the telephonic warning order to the Army came much later than the Squadron, who to their credit, were ready to take off within three hours after they received their first orders at 0700 hours or thereabouts. The time differential had obviated the possibility of proper loading coordination between the Air Adjutant, GSO2 (Air) of the Brigade and the load master of the aircraft. This also needed a last minute change of the crew when Gp Capt(s) Bewoor and Goyal ran from K 2979 to K 2878, the latter then being placed second in sequence of flight.

The other problem that I had learnt was that the aircraft had adequate fuel to take us to Trivandrum but not upto Male, put us down there or drop us and return to Trivandrum. A miracle was performed by the Chief Engineering Officer (CEO), Group Captain (later Air Vice Marshal Gurunani) and his Team – by the time, we were ready to be airborne at around 1740 hours, the aircraft had adequate fuel for Male and return to Trivandrum, a refueling task which should normally have taken some 4 to 5 hours, was completed in just about 90 minutes. Thanks to the CEO – I am of the opinion that he had prayed for us and Lord Hanuman had been successfully invoked.

We were finally rolling out at about 1755 and were in the air at 1800 – that is

when I got hold of the tourist book, called Rupinder and Lt MK Singh (he was the Officer in Charge of the Team to rescue President Gayoom) and showed them the photograph of the President – it was a very brief discussion on procedure and with a lot of emphasis on initiative by MK who undertook briefing of his Team by moving from man to man showing the picture and procedure to be followed. In the meantime, we were already a little past Bhopal at 29000 ft when I had a small discussion with Gp Capt Bewoor, the first and final one to one, and went on to brief in detail the two companies with me in K 2878 on the aircraft's public address system – there were no slides of any kind and no visual display of any kind except the circulation of the book, kind courtesy, Mr Banerjee, the High Commissioner who was on board the aircraft with us.

I can not but write about the brilliant view that I had from the cockpit and the navigator's cabin of the terra firma below with lights of Hyderabad and Bangalore shining as bouquets of stars designed especially for the 6 PARA flight into this operation with our super confidence and intelligence uncertainty. We, paratroopers and our aviator colleagues in sky blue certainly have a very positive outlook and appreciative view of small things in life even in somewhat difficult circumstances.

As we were approaching Trivandrum, I believe Trivandrum was very upset that we were not descending which had to be overcome by our Captain, Bewoor, by speaking to someone senior, his ex Iraq colleague, who got us the clearance to proceed and we were on to the objective; we were over the Indian Ocean and Male

was just some 600 kms away. I was told that we shall be landing; the codeword HADIYA for Hulule airport being safe for landing had been received. I went on to intercom and was told the exit procedure which information was passed on to the two companies. And we waited – I went into the navigator’s cabin where Groupie MK Singh, the navigator, was hard at work trying successfully to supplement the efforts of the pilots using the radar to align the aircraft. We were descending now – blind and based on the radar which was picking up a lot of coral in addition to the runway which would look very attractive to naval aviators but not exactly so to someone flying the massive IL-76. Having aligned thus with the radar, Groupie Bewoor, at about 100 metres above the sea level and some 20 kms away, asked for lights which came on for barely three to five seconds – I had, half lying in the navigators cabin, felt I had not even completed a wink when the lights were put off. The blind approach continued and a bit later I saw the runway lights come on again which were put off the moment the tires kissed the tarmac. It was a very uncomfortable situation for Groupie Bewoor who made a very skillful and rather innovative landing by literally sitting down on the brakes and deploying thrust reversers on all the four engines of the aircraft with great shuddering. The aircraft stopped and turned around about 300 metres short of the end of the runway, the doors opened and we ran out to secure our objectives while I moved towards the Western side of Hulhule and Rupinder rushed to the ATC to contact the National Security Service (NSS - now called Maldivian National Defence Forces - MNDF) to be informed that their HQ was

under attack and they would be unable to hold on much longer. The rest of the companies were headed to their respective objectives which were secured within 40-45 minutes. D company detained some men who looked suspicious but put up no resistance. Time now was about 2245 and I had to get across to Male. The second aircraft, K 2979 had landed 15 minutes thereafter. Its Capt, Wing Commander Dhillon, approached the Groupie; I am told he was worried because he had seen some of our paratroopers crossing the runway on his landing run and thought he might have overrun some of them. I certainly assure you, the paratroopers, most often can outsmart landing aeroplanes. Nothing untoward happened – remember Lord Hanuman !!

My concern was to get across to Male – after about 10 minutes, Mr Ibrahim Faisal, the man at ATC and the Officer in Charge of the Hulhule Airport, was brought over to me by Rupinder and he told me that there was one local boat for airport rescue with a capacity of about 50 passengers – that force would be inadequate. He also mentioned that he was trying to locate its driver. We collected our men from Engineers and some boys from 6 PARA Pioneer Platoon who got hold of seven speed boats from a nearby tourist resort and brought them over with the drivers in about 90 minutes - the latter were rather scared. Our boys manned the boats, reached Hulule and our lead troops were embarked with Rupinder and MK Singh’s teams followed by me in the Airport Rescue boat whose driver had been located. 3 PARA Company placed under my command with then Maj (later Lt Gen) NS Ghei, was ordered to send a

platoon to the Southern side of Male to create a diversion.

As our boat left Hulule, we saw a ship head towards the exit from Male Atoll. I told Umed on radio to engage it – however, Brig Bulsara too had already ordered its engagement. The ship was hit by the three rockets – I learnt later from Capt (later Cmde) Gokhale, Skipper of INS BETWA, that the Ship, which the rebels had commandeered to escape, was identified as MV PROGRESS LIGHT. As a consequence of those hits, it had been taking in some water which made it list to port slowing it considerably. It was later sunk by INS BETWA, which had been joined by INS GODAVARI, but not before it was boarded and 68 shaken up hostages, which included Maldivian Tourism Minister, Hon'ble Mr Mujhtaba. Unfortunately, the rebels had shot five hostages and thrown them into the sea before it was boarded by our sailors.

Rupinder established the beach head at Male on its North West which I reached a few minutes after him. We saw a party of some men in uniform carrying boxes – I ordered them to be detained but they turned out to be the guides sent by the NSS to contact us. Very cautiously, we accepted – they guided us to the house where Mr Ilyas Ibrahim, the Deputy Defence Minister, was in hiding. Rupinder spoke to him; the 'secret' safe house was contacted where President Gayoom was who was informed that we were on the way – Rupinder informed me simultaneously; I started moving in the direction of the said house where Rupinder had reached but the Presidential security personnel were a bit reluctant till contacted again by Mr Ilyas Ibrahim. We went and

met the President. I asked Rupinder to escort him to NSS HQ which had since been abandoned by the escaping rebels who had created a breach in the boundary wall of the Building but failed to force entry because of fusillades of machine gun fire which the NSS under siege repeatedly directed towards them whenever they attempted entry. The President reached there around 0200 on 04 Nov 1988; I had also requested Brig Bulsara who joined the President at the NSS HQ, accompanied by Mr Banerjee. President Gayoom spoke to PM, Rajiv Gandhi at 0430 approximately and we believed that the first task was over whereas clearance of rebel remanats and their sympathizers was continued in earnest.

Subsequent waves of aircraft and troops kept landing; my third and fourth companies reorganized by milking manpower from Support and Administrative companies, joined me at Male by the morning while 3 PARA came in around 0740 hrs. In the house to house search, we apprehended about 20 rebels and sympathisers who were handed over to NSS.

At about 0910, Subedar (later Subedar Major and Honorary Capt) Pritam Singh of A Company, contacted me on radio and told me that some armed men were running away in a speed boat with a lot of material which looked like boxes. When challenged, they did not stop. Pritam got into another boat, boarded it and chased the escaping boat asking it to stop. When it did not, he fired a rifle grenade at it. The boat, not yet out of the coral, started sinking and its occupants jumped out with one man wounded by shrapnel; they were

apprehended and the wounded man was evacuated to our Advanced Dressing station from 60 Para Field Ambulance; material in the boat was recovered subsequently and was handed over to NSS as were the apprehended men.

I informed the Commander that Male was safe. Bull, as we affectionately called Brig Bulsara, ever ready not to take but pass the credit on to subordinates in action, asked me to declare to NSS and President's Office that Male was now safe and secured by 6 PARA at about 1100 on 04 November, 1988.

It was heartening to see Maj Gen Don Khurana, Major General, General Staff, HQ Southern Command, my senior instructor at the Defence Services Staff College in 1980-81, visit us at about 0700 whom I briefed regarding the action in progress. He expressed his satisfaction and returned to Hulhule to return to Trivandrum. Our media had descended in large numbers early in the morning around 0730 or thereabouts –

all of them wanted to speak to Brig Bulsara and me interfering and impeding us in our work. Needless to add that there were many who were a little worried about their own safety because house to house search in Male was still in progress at that time.

The Brigade stayed on in Maldives for a fortnight; we had our daily military procedures, paper work, operational debriefs etc to go through including patrols in Town and neighbouring islands in conjunction with the NSS. INS BETWA reached us on 05 November followed by INS GODAVARI on 07th came in, later with the rebels and hostages. The Navy had evacuated the wounded among the prisoners to Command Hospital, Pune, directly which included, Mr Mujtabha, Minister of Tourism, Maldives.

I was instructed by the Commander on 14 November 1988 that I have to stay on in Maldives till further instructions. In the process, 6 PARA stayed in Maldives for a year



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