



Book Review

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Commodore (retd) Vijay Jerath, I.N. VtC, *25 Missile Boat Squadron – An Untold Story* (New Delhi: Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2013), 228 pages. ISBN 9788172344788

Unlike its sister services, it was only in 1971 that the Indian Navy got its first chance to take part in a war in independent India. From the Navy's perspective, it was "perhaps one of the greatest pre-emptive naval operations since World War II, incorporating the elements of surprise, massive fire power, precision of execution, communication and teamwork." No wonder, the Indian Navy went on to accomplish the task assigned to it within the first few days of the war. During the war, it could control the seas around both wings of Pakistan, denying freedom of navigation to the Pakistani Navy; merchant ships would not dare to approach any of the Pakistani harbours.

Every year the "Navy Day" is celebrated on 4 December to commemorate the devastating attack unleashed on Karachi by the valiant missile boats of the 25th Missile Squadron on that day in 1971. Interestingly, the attack remains a most glorious chapter in the history of the Indian Navy. Yet, there remained a gap in the

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literature on this “glorious chapter”. No more. Cmde Vijay Jerath’s *25 Missile Boat Squadron – An Untold Story* has perfectly filled the void.

The book under review gives a sense of what happened at the naval front during 1971 war, with special reference to the 25 Missile Boat Squadron. Although written 42 years after the operation, the importance of the book is not lost. As observed pertinently by Vice Admiral (retd) KK Nayyar in his Foreword to the book,

Naval scholars and historians down the years can pore carefully over the details of the operations in order to develop new tactics and to hone the existing ones. Therefore, it is imperative that the factual information gleaned from those, who actually participated in the operations, be captured and recorded before it is lost to failing memories.

Cmde Jerath was one of the few persons who could write on the operation, because he was in command of the missile boat *INS Vinash*, which was part of the 25 Missile Boat Squadron that caused considerable damage to Karachi during the 1971 war. He was awarded the Vir Chakra gallantry medal for his daring acts. *INS Vinash*, which in Hindi actually means “Destruction”, had in fact created a record of having spent over 10 days out at sea – the longest time by any missile boat – without any major mishap. The book does not abruptly start from the operation, but contains vivid details of the entire process: right from the conception of the project; training in Russia; return to India, the work up and deployment of the missile boats; the attack during the War and even the retreat, but it is not clear why only two pages were dedicated to narrating the actual attack.

The illustrious 25th “Killer” Missile Boat Squadron consisted of the Vidyut class missile boats, an Indian variant of the Soviet Osa class. When the Soviets offered the boats in 1964, India did not show much interest. But, on witnessing their performance in the Six Day War, the Indian Navy went ahead and finalized the deal. When the boats were finally at sea for independent trials and combined workup, war clouds were looming large on the horizon. Despite the paucity of sufficient time, the crew of the *Vinash* handled their task deftly and with speed. The author calls those who alleged that “the Missile Boat Commanding Officers, who took part in the Operation, did not know their job”, and were “misinformed ignoramus”. In his own words, he asserts:

Let me aver that every Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, Engineer Officer, Missile and Gunnery Officer and every Senior and Junior Sailor was totally “worked up” and all were tested to the extreme by the Soviet Admiral and his Staff – and every one passed with flying colours. Every sailor had been converted into a “User-Maintainer” and each one proudly carried a multi-meter to check the functionality of their respective equipments.

Going by the way they achieved the objective, one cannot but agree with the author. The task was done, despite confronting, as a sailor’s saying goes, “everything happens in threes – misfortune especially”.

The author attributes two other reasons, though indirectly, for the success. Most sailors “believe that ships possess their own identities. Some ships are happy, others sad and some demand at least one human sacrifice a year – this variation exists even between two ships of the same Class.” Going by this belief, it looks like *Vinash* was happy with Cmde Jerath and his crew. To the author, “The Commanding Officers, especially the Commissioning ones, believe that their ships are no less than their wives. Perhaps better, in that they never complain, nor nag.” He was suitably rewarded for the trust reposed on his boat.

Appreciably, the author tries to fit his narrative within the framework of the 10 “Principles of War” by listing them in Chapter 11, but surprisingly, he abruptly stops at the second Principle and makes the reader to wonder what happens to other Principles. However, one can discount that and enjoy the day-by-day gripping account of the operation starting from 2 December 1971. What is also thrilling was the post-attack movement from Karachi to Mumbai. In Admiral SN Kohli’s words elsewhere, “Our missile boats were lucky to have got away without any air attacks by shore-based aircraft from Pakistani territory during their retreat.” In fact, the Chief of Naval Staff of Pakistan requested the Air Chief for a dawn air strike to cripple the retreating missile boats. The reply he reportedly got was, “Sorry Old Chap I cannot spare my planes. I am busy on the Eastern front and all is fair in love and war.” On the other hand, the Indian Air Force and the Navy seemed to have had first-class coordination. In this regard, the author could have considered analysing various mistakes made by the Pakistanis that led to the overall success of the Indian attack. Also the narrative would have been more interesting had it been done as part of the larger narrative of the war in all fronts. It is important to know what was happening elsewhere when the 25 Missile Boat Squadron was performing its task.

Undoubtedly, the book provides a highly informative account both to an informed and uninformed audience for the single reason that the author attempts to describe things that “took a long time to write and eventually to read”, but “in real time, it took not more than a second.” Yet, the “book is written in the format of a story told in a very informal style”, making it as lucid as possible.