

War Memoirs

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I remember the war of 1971 very vividly. The most enduring memory is probably that of me, a four-year old boy, sitting in our home in south Kolkata with my aged paternal grandmother in the darkness of blackouts with a dim light in a single room and newspapers stuffed in all possible

crevices of the room to prevent even an iota of light from exiting the room. The blackouts were accompanied by the thunderous sounds of fighter aircrafts in the sky. The blackouts were intended to prevent the enemy fighter aircrafts from knowing the location of Kolkata so as to prevent them from bombing the city. Our fighter aircrafts were in the sky trying to shoot down the fighter aircrafts of the enemy and the battle in the sky raged on.

For some days, the battle in the sky over Kolkata raged and then it stopped. I was indeed glad to come out of the war physically unscathed but the experience of war in my childhood left me with a lasting impression of the horrors of war where death is just a bomb away.

The enemy fighter aircrafts tried to bomb the Kalaikunda Air Force Station very close to Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur. Their war tactic was to fly into the Bay of Bengal from their country so as to escape our fighter aircrafts at our border and then fly into our country from the Bay of Bengal over the Midnapur coastline. In the battle that followed, one of the enemy fighter aircrafts was shot down. The then students of the IIT landed - no pun intended - at the spot before our military did and took important documents from the fallen aeroplane and from the pockets of the dead pilot. They handed over all these material to our military after our military arrived at the site.

The Air Force gave a retired MiG-21 to the IIT and, when I was a student there, it was de rigueur for students to pose in front of the MiG-21 at least once during their tenure at the IIT and to have their photograph taken. I too have such photographs of mine. The MiG-21 is kept in front of the old building of the IIT with its nose facing the building as if in silent salute to the patriots interned there when the building was a prison during foreign rule. My paternal great-uncle, Shaheed H.C. Bhattacharya, who never married and died a martyr, was one such prisoner.

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