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## **Operation Balwan: A Case Study of Counter Insurgency Operations in Northeast India**

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**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES**

**Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw**, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC  
1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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# **Operation Balwan: A Case Study of Counter Insurgency Operations in Northeast India**

## **Abstract**

Operation BALWAN, executed by 4 JAT in the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest (DSRF) of Assam from August to September 2005, exemplifies a significant achievement in counter-insurgency (CI) against the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). This research study examines the operational planning, topographical obstacles, intelligence integration, and tactical execution that led to the demolition of a persistent insurgent sanctuary. The operation successfully isolated and neutralised insurgent leadership by employing a combination of Electronic Warfare (EW) intercepts, human intelligence (HUMINT), and terrain analysis through continuous search-and-destroy missions. The research elucidates the function of psychological operations in securing local support, the tactical employment of deception and surprise, and the paramount significance of perseverance in asymmetric warfare. Moreover, it underscores the operational effects of civil-military collaboration and real-time intelligence integration in constricting the adversary's tactical domain. Operation BALWAN not only undermined ULFA's operational foundation but also catalysed the commencement of a peace process, signifying a significant accomplishment in Indian counter-insurgency theory. The report finishes with doctrinal insights, highlighting the importance of

adaptable planning, inventive strategies, and control of terrain as crucial to counterinsurgency operations in intricate woodland and riverine environments.

## Introduction

The Northeastern region of India, with its complex terrain, diverse ethnic composition, porous international borders, and long history of insurgent activities, has been a focal point for internal security challenges since India's independence. Among the various insurgent groups operating in the region, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has remained one of the most potent threats to peace and stability, particularly in Assam. The ULFA's use of dense forested terrain, including protected ecological zones like the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest (DSRF), as safe havens for camps and operations posed significant operational challenges for Indian security forces.

Operation Balwan, launched in August–September 2005 by the 4 JAT Regiment of the Indian Army, stands out as a meticulously planned and executed counter-insurgency (CI) operation. It not only disrupted the operational core of ULFA's 28 Battalion – one of its most active and militarily significant units, but also marked a turning point in the psychological and tactical war against insurgency in Assam. What made this operation particularly remarkable was the manner in which it combined elements of military strategy, intelligence analysis, terrain familiarisation and psychological operations, all in one of the most difficult environments imaginable.

Triggered by an innocuous electronic intercept regarding the procurement of 50 pencil cells, the operation evolved into one of the most sustained and high-impact counter-insurgency campaigns conducted in India's recent military history. The operation reflected the importance of real-time intelligence, adaptability in combat,

and the need for civil-military cooperation in population-sensitive conflict zones. Operation Balwan's multi-phased approach, ranging from the initial occupation of the forest and the sealing of escape routes to the sustained pursuit and eventual neutralization of high-value ULFA targets, was emblematic of modern CI doctrine in action.

Additionally, the operation's execution within an ecologically sensitive region highlights the intricate balance between national security imperatives and environmental considerations. The Army's effort to maintain this balance, by minimizing collateral damage, engaging with local communities, and providing humanitarian assistance, demonstrates the evolving nature of counter-insurgency that goes beyond pure military engagement.

From a strategic standpoint, the operation's success was a result not only of military firepower but also of disciplined perseverance, psychological dominance and the effective integration of intelligence inputs from surrendered militants, local informants, and electronic warfare. The psychological impact on ULFA was so profound that it catalysed the creation of a People's Consultative Group (PCG), hastily formed by ULFA to negotiate peace, thereby indirectly initiating a political dialogue with the Centre.

This research paper aims to present a detailed case study of Operation Balwan, focusing on its planning, execution, and broader implications in the context of India's counter-insurgency framework. It seeks to analyze the operation through military, political and socio-psychological lenses, drawing lessons not only for future CI operations in Northeast India but also for internal security strategies globally. In doing so, the paper contributes to both academic and strategic discourses on conflict resolution, insurgency management and the evolution of Indian military operations in internal conflict zones.

## Operational Planning and Execution

Operation BALWAN was launched by 4 JAT from 31 Aug 2005 to 30 Sep 2005, subsequent to a series of minor operations ever since the unit was relocated from North Lakhimpur District in Assam and assigned a fresh task in June 2005. The unit was redeployed and was tasked to carry out operations in its new area of responsibility of Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest in Tinsukia District of Assam. The unit conducted a series of operations since then to fulfill the tasks which included sanitization of Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest by search and destroy operations, mapping the Reserve Forest and creating data bank, developing and enhancing intelligence base in the area, keeping all the *ghats* and crossing places into the reserve forest under surveillance, denying use of the reserve forest to ULFA terrorists, carrying out intelligence specific operations and area domination of the forest area and at the same time addressing the concern of civil population by effective psychological operations to win their hearts and minds and thereby weaning them away from the terrorists.

### Idea of Operation Balwan

The idea of Operation BALWAN in the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest originated from a logical interpretation of an EW intercept followed by diligent execution of a delicate plan that resulted in obtaining leads of high value, which would form the basis of planning of Operation BALWAN.

On the morning of 28 Aug 2005, a radio intercept revealed that a courier would fetch 50 pencil cells for the ULFA cadres operating somewhere inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest. The information was corroborated in light of previous intercepts, and suitable stops were immediately made at relevant locations. In the evening, the same day an Area Domination Patrol at Guijan Ghat intercepted one villager of Pomua Laika Village (located inside the

Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest) with 50 pencil cells. He was thoroughly interrogated and he revealed that 2-3-armed ULFA cadres frequently visited the Laika group of villages using small three men boats. A quick analysis suggested the existence of some ULFA camps in general area East of Laika group of villages. The villager also revealed that he could identify 8-9 ULFA terrorists operating in the area, although he was not sure about the exact location of these camps/hideouts. He also confirmed that three overground workers from village Pomua Laika had been facilitating the movement of ULFA terrorists in the general area of Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest.

## Planning of the Operation

The information thus obtained was of high value and required intelligent analysis and detailed planning with an innovative approach as information of this nature was always forthcoming in the past too, based on which the unit had carried out several operations. But this piece of information was highly actionable. A detailed plan was thus conceived by the author over the next two days, and accordingly, Operation BALWAN was launched in the early hours of 31 August 2005.

## Points For Consideration

- **Terrain**

Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest is a marshy island that spreads over an area of 765 square kilometres, of which the core area of the Reserve Forest is about 340 square kilometers. It is surrounded by tributaries of the Brahmaputra River in the South and East and by the Brahmaputra River in the North and West. The Reserve Forest is tropical and receives heavy rainfall. It is also infested with rich flora and fauna and is a habitat to a variety of wild animals like elephants, leopards and wild horses. It houses a riverine tropical

rain forest. It is bounded by the Dangori River from the East and South and River Brahmaputra surrounds it from the North and West. There exist numerous *nalas* crisscrossing the forest and *Bils* (local name for water bodies having stagnant water). During the monsoon, the entire forest is submerged in water. However, during the dry season South Western portion of the Forest, i.e., Dibru Reserve Forest, remains waterlogged while Saikhowa Reserve Forest (North Eastern portion) dries up. The forest is navigable only along main River and *nalas* for which assistance of the local fishermen is required. Cross-country movement is extremely difficult inside the forest, especially during monsoons. Numerous water bodies in the forest cannot be crossed without boats. Expert, skilled fishermen or boatmen are required to negotiate the water bodies. Keeping an operation secret is very difficult if these local fishermen/boatmen are employed.

Important population centers are at Ajuka village, Erasuti village, Rigbi Laika village, Phasidia Laika village, and Pomua Laika village. The total population of the Laika group of villages is approximately 3400, while that of Ajuka village is approximately a hundred. The course of water channels undergoes regular changes. Over the years, the water channels have undergone a noticeable change as against marked on the map. Hence, there is a constant requirement to update maps at regular intervals.

- **Entry/Exit Points Into/Out Of Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest**

It being a very large area, fraught with a number of escape routes, posed a great challenge to the decision-making process. The forest could not be sealed without identifying these points, particularly on the ground. In fact, there exist innumerable water channels and the same provide concealed access and exit to anyone plying on a small/fighter boat.

- **Vastness of Area of Interest**

The effective area to be covered under the operation was 765 sq km, which in no terms was an ignorable fact.

- **Selection of Effective/Suitable Stops**

Considering the above-mentioned facts, it became necessary to appreciate the suitable stops that could ensure no free and unchecked movement of unwanted elements. This in itself was a gigantic task.

- **Selection Of Area of Specific Search**

Where to search was another big question to be answered because it was really not the first time the operation of this nature was being planned or executed. While the previously scanned areas did not warranty non-existence of the terrorists in those areas, there was still a huge area yet to be searched.

- **Resource Control**

A very important measure that needs to be taken up very delicately during such operations involving habitats of local villagers in a Counter Terrorist operation. It has thus been the most difficult aspect to execute. The movement of over 1500 small boats of fishermen could facilitate the easy escape of terrorists from the area.

- **Isolation of Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest**

If the identified area could be isolated as envisaged, half the battle would be won before the actual operation of search and destroy could commence.

Maintaining Surprise was another difficult task due to the nature of the terrain, early warning tools available to the terrorist

camps, administration of a large body of troops, difficulties in casualty evacuation in case of such an eventuality, and the presence of wild animals in the forest were a few other important considerations while planning and executing the operations in such a terrain.

- **Lessons Learnt from Previous Operations Launched in the Area**

It had been experienced that ULFA terrorists never abandoned the Reserve Forest, whenever their camps were busted and would wait for Security Forces to leave the area, and would reoccupy their camps/hideouts and then continue their activities from the Reserve Forest.

## **Execution**

### **Phase 1: Initial Foothold (31 August to 03 September 2005)**

#### **31 August 2005**

The operation was planned based on the considerations mentioned above and then launched on early hours of 31 August 2005. Based on the data of boats and boatmen/fishermen all along the *ghats* in the unit area of responsibility, available with the battalion, which was collated over the past two months, all the company columns simultaneously approached the fishermen/boatmen at around 1 AM. This was done to maintain the surprise of the operation. There was no scope left for information of operation being launched to be passed on to the ULFA Terrorists or their overground workers. That the fishermen would be away from their homes for the period of operations was catered for by providing rations and other critical stores and supplies to their households. The information of the operation was shared with the Police and civil administration authorities,

and their assistance was sought for this requirement. Police representatives were detailed by the authorities to accompany the columns to meet the legal requirements. The columns of boats were launched almost simultaneously into the Dangori River from Tamuli Ghat, Dighal Tarrang, Guijan Ghat along the southern and eastern ghats, and from Three Mile Ghat into the Brahmaputra River from the North at around 2 AM on 31 August 2005. Surprise of the operation was total, and no information could reach any ULFA operatives as the event unfolded in the next seventy-two hours.

It was planned that the individual who had been apprehended with fifty pencil cells, would take us to the houses of other overground workers residing in Pomua Laika Village. Once the three operatives were apprehended, they would be asked to take the column launched from Guijan Ghat under the author, who was the Commanding Officer of 4 JAT, to the nearest point where ULFA terrorists had been permitting them. Thereafter, the plan was to search the entire area with the help of the other columns, which were each commanded by their respective Company Commanders.

### Twist in The Tale

So, the boat column with the author and the Ghatak platoon left Guijan Ghat at around 2 AM and headed for Pomua Laika Village to nab the three overground workers of ULFA. The column reached the outskirts of the village, disembarked from the boats, and started movement on foot towards the village with the apprehended linkmen leading the column as a guide to identify the houses of the three OGWs. As soon as he indicated the houses, the sub-teams of the column stormed into the houses and carried out an extensive search, but found nothing. It was reminiscent of the adage attributed to Prussian Field Marshall Helmuth von

Moltke, who had said, “the plan is the first casualty of war (operation).” This had been catered for, like in any military operation, contingency planning is worked out beforehand to prevent any disappointment and halt in the momentum of the operation. Failure in nabbing any of the three confirmed OGWs as planned brought a decisive break in the op at the very initial stage that urgently required a quick decision. It seemed to take shape of a —speculative search in the vast jungle. A quick mental appreciation was soon carried out, and the search party led by the author moved eastwards.

### Are We Heading to an ULFA Camp?

After ruling out various water channels based on previous experiences and recently obtained information, a particular water channel leading into the jungle was selected. Suitable stops were placed and the author with the Ghatak platoon moved inside on a boat. It was later learnt that this channel was a forbidden route to locals by the terrorists (which strengthened the belief in the selection of the right channel). The water channel bifurcated further and the selection of the correct channel now became very crucial. However, the column kept moving ahead, appreciating ‘the small leads’ on the ground until we reached a point beyond which the boats could not move because of the shallowness of the water channel. The column immediately disembarked from the boats and started wading through water, chest-deep at places. The party kept moving ahead and finally spotted a transit camp/ point based on a *machaan* over a tree overlooking the water channel. On close inspection, it seemed that the *machaan* had been occupied till very recently. Lots of items were recovered from the spot, and the JATs stormed the entire area. The items recovered included about six blankets, 22 steel plates, one lady's shawl, four mosquito nets, nine Tarpaulins, five pairs of shirts and trousers, three jackets, a

lot of cooking utensils, 'Fair and Lovely' cream packets, one clinic plus shampoo, one packet playing cards, five table lamps, two litres of edible oil and four small boats in the vicinity.

Another column led by Lt Amitava Dastidar Ghosh busted another abandoned camp in the close vicinity. The items recovered at the site included two front hand guard Self Loading Rifle (SLR), one butt of SLR, a Camouflage pouch, 181 pencil cells, 28 torch cells, one broken solar charger, two tent structures, three disposable syringes, Medicines, three Pickle Containers, three Walkman sets, a few cooking utensils and a letter pad with ULFA stamp belonging to one Papu Bora and many other stores. A quick mental appreciation and analysis led to the inference that there was definitely a presence of some ULFA cadres, including some women cadres in and around the area where the column had reached so far. So, fresh instructions were passed on to the other Company columns to move towards the area and further tighten the noose. The search continued till late in the evening when, finally, it was dark, and the column took defensive positions on the ground to avoid any unnecessary mishap or casualties to the troops. The Order group was summoned and a brainstorming session was conducted. In the team, in addition to the linkman from Pomua Laika village, were fishermen, two ULFA surrenderers who had earlier surrendered to the unit while it was deployed in Nalbari during the Bhutan operations against ULFA. Trust and faith were reposed in the ex-ULFA surrenderers, and it was mutual. They had proved to be trustworthy over the past two and a half years of the unit counter insurgency operations. Soon, they would become the prime advisors to the author during the upcoming sustained operations in the forest. The author paused the operations for the day and planned to search the area afresh early next morning.

01 September 2005

## Search

It was more or less confirmed last night that there were ULFA camps in the vicinity of our search area, so as the day broke out on 01 September 2005, the column started the search of the area yet again. All the exit/entry routes to the area were occupied by stops, and boat patrols commenced vigorous patrolling of the existing gaps between these points. All the columns had been suitably moved and concentrated to the suspected area.

## Routine Ideas Would Not Work

ULFA Cadres had been clever and hence had been surviving despite many operations inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest. Being locals, they had the advantage of local support over the security forces (SF). It was a foregone conclusion that routine ideas would not work. Every small piece of information or input was to be correctly analysed, worked on, and acted upon swiftly. Mental flexibility took centre stage in planning the next step. The Security Forces needed to be a step ahead of the ULFA cadres in all respects. The unit was also aware that every movement of theirs was being closely monitored. It would be a slugfest between SF and ULFA. It was a matter of who would blink first. As these thoughts were crossing the mind of the author while moving in a boat, he noticed fresh bare foot marks on wet sand on the shore of the stream. As they were closely watched, some *tamul* spitted freshly was also found on the wet sand. There were also impressions of high heel sandals (probably of a woman) along the path. The linkman of Pomua Laika was with the author and he confirmed that there was no villager permitted by the ULFA operatives in that general area. The column was called to move further. Yet again, there came a point beyond which the boats could not have moved due to the shallowness of the water in the stream. As the column dismounted

from the boats, it was noticed that the water was murky as they moved ahead, indicating that someone had just moved along that stream. The column started moving along the murky water stream and yet again came to a bifurcation where, from, two water streams could be seen. But only one stream had murky waters and the other was relatively clean. The author was leading in chest-deep water when he heard one of the jawans whispering, “*yeh CO sahib aaj hamein duba kar marwa kar hi manenge*”. And thud came a rifle burst from the opposite direction. As they returned fire, the author called out the jawans to come forward and start their job as scouts. There was no more firing from the opposite end and the column rushed forward and searched the entire area. The column could not believe what they saw. There was a big tent on a huge stilt with lots of war-like stores and documents. As they entered, they also had a video camera and while searching the area for the presence of any ULFA militant, they also video-graphed the raid on the ULFA camp. The author organised all the other columns in the vicinity and passed on the exact coordinates of the ULFA Camp to all concerned. An organised search was conducted and yet another larger Tent on a stilt was discovered nearby. After pursuing the clues for a while, the search party found itself hitting a live camp inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest, which was otherwise supposed to be a National Park. The recoveries made at the camp were a clear indication of the camp housing about 18-20 ULFA leaders, if not more. There were clothes of women too, indicating that women cadres were also present in the camp. Among other war-like stores, there were the Constitution of ULFA, duty rosters with names of sentries discharging two-hourly duties at the camp. A few diaries of important ULFA functionaries, including Moon Bora aka SS Lt Jiten Dutta OC C Company 28 Battalion ULFA, Diaries and pictures of many other leaders and cadres, IEDs and explosives, walkie-talkie radio sets, ammunition, etc. This was also an indication that the occupants of the camp got very little reaction time. Before they

could abandon the camp. A search of the area was conducted, but no one was found. So camouflaged was the camp that probably the occupants thought no one would ever be able to reach the camp. There were TVs, Video players, CDs, Batteries, Solar panels, Mosquito repellants in huge quantities, rations, and steaming hot food with the wood for cooking still red hot, lots of reading material, dictionaries, blankets, bed sheets, mosquito nets, combat pattern dress material and dresses, civil pattern shirts and pants, half pants, slippers, lady sandals, ladies' lingerie etc.

A quick mental appreciation and brainstorming session with the young company commanders was carried out, and a thorough search was conducted in the area till last light on 01 September 2005. Very little other than finding the two abandoned camps was achieved. But now was the time to persevere. The opponents were uprooted from their traditional safe haven inside DSRF. They had been occupying the dense forest for many years without being disturbed or bothered. The ULFA camp area became the firm base and battalion Headquarter from where the balance of the operation was being planned and executed.

### 02 September 2005

Search continued by day, and ambushes were laid on possible exit routes of the ULFA militants by night. A severe thunderstorm hit the forest area, and it rained throughout the night, giving respite to both the Security Forces and ULFA leaders and cadres, from operations, as all were now concerned about saving themselves from rains to be prepared for another battle as soon as the rain had stopped. The boats in the vast Brahmaputra River seemed to capsize with every wave of wind and thunderstorms. As the day broke out, the storm subsided.

The discovery of four camps in the first two days had really kept at abeyance all previous apprehensions and queries if ULFA camps really existed in Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest. Those who were deployed in Counter Insurgency grid in the area had very confidently declared that no camps existed in the forest, when the unit was initially inducted into the area with the task of searching and destroying ULFA camps inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest. While three operations were conducted in the forest between 10 July 2005 (Operation Burhibil), 20 July 2005 (Operation Tamuli) and Operation Guijan - Laika on 05 August 2005 and the author was sure that there was presence of ULFA inside the forest, there was stiff resistance to the belief by all the other units which had been in the area for past 1-2 years. There were unprecedented series of blasts carried out by ULFA in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, NLP, Sibsagar, Nalbari districts on 07 August 2005. The blasts on oil pipelines in Tinsukia were a very clear indication that the ULFA cadres were operating from their safe havens in the forest areas, including Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forests. The Corps Commander of Tezpur-based Corps Headquarters had visited the Brigade Headquarters at Laipuli and made it very clear that all inputs emanating from Electronic Warfare as well as ground sources, were indicating that ULFA had well-established camps inside DSRF. In the past two days, all the appreciations made by the Corps Commander had come true.

The column led by CO, while searching in the thickly forested area were wading through chest-deep inundated terrain. Deep standing water all around and even further ahead gave no inkling of what lay ahead. At about 4.20 PM on 03 September 2005, the scout stepped on wet mud in the forest, and a stink of human feces emerged from the ground. It was noticed that someone had just relieved himself and covered the feces with big leaves on which the

scout had accidentally stepped over. As the column moved forward, it saw barefoot marks on wet sand and started tracking the footsteps. A volley of automatic fire emanating from the opposite direction came down on the column, and it immediately retaliated with firing of all available automatic weapons. A fierce encounter ensued and lasted for about 15 minutes. The column took positions in the thick forest. After the firing subsided from both sides, a search of the area was launched by the Ghatak platoon. Some of the ULFA cadres panicked and jumped into the Brahmaputra River. A few of them had even been injured, as there were telltale signs of a blood trail. On search of the entire area, the column under the author got documents, equipment and stores of high value including the diaries of a few important leaders of ULFA, photo albums of a few ULFA leaders and cadres, some bags with dry rations like Rice and dal, a lot of ammunition of AK 47 and Self Loading rifles, magazines of these weapons, a few functional radio sets, clothing of men, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), ULFA demand pads, receipts of 'donations' from various affluent people and industries of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts and many other items which were of high intelligence value.

On reorganising the columns, it was realized that the ULFA leaders and cadres had not abandoned the area either by design or because they could not escape due to the presence of the SF columns and boat patrols, which were operating round the clock in the area. Initially, ULFA would not have abandoned the area due to their experience of Security Forces leaving the area of operations immediately after the operations, but later, they would have been left with no escape routes to leave the area. This theory was further reinforced when a radio message was intercepted on 05 September 2005, asking for help from outside through one leader code-named 'Rocket'. The intercept revealed that SS Lt Jiten Dutta alias Moon Bora (OC C Company, 28 Battalion, ULFA) was present inside

Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest along with SS Pte Soumar Baruah (Radio operator of SS Capt Mrinal Hazarika, Commander 28 Battalion, ULFA) and were asking for a large boat and revealed that they had not had any food for the past 2-3 days. The intercepts further revealed on 11 September 2005 that Jiten Dutta was still trapped inside the forest, and his group was unable to escape from the Army net. (HUM BHI JAAL KE ANDAR PHANS GAYE HAIN, PHAAND KAR NAHI JA SAKTEY).

A decision was taken by the author, to further extend the operation till all the trapped cadres surrendered due to lack of food and basic needs or they succumbed due to hunger. Any attempt by the trapped ULFA cadres to escape would result in an encounter with the SF columns.

## Phase 2: Tightening the Noose-Shrinking Area of Search

(04-10 September 2005)

It had become quite evident from phase 1 that the operation was progressing on the right lines. The situation demanded that the trapped ULFA cadres be put under more pressure. The operation required a strong push in the right direction at this juncture. The noose had to be tightened. The terrorists were to be made to run or pressurized to either surrender or face severe consequences, including facing the wrath of a ruthless operation by the security forces. The SF took certain measures to dominate the area, like regular patrolling of the area, strict resource and movement control of the villagers of the Laika group of villages in the West, and Ajuka village on the Eastern edge of DSRF. Medical aid camps were held to ensure that villagers did not face any health issues. While carrying out the medical camp, the SF learnt that many villagers had never seen a doctor or any medical aid in the past. SF also extended other aid to the villagers, such as providing rations and other necessities to them.

Regular monitoring of Radio intercepts and their analysis continued during the period. The vernacular media was also closely monitored to get intelligence inputs as most of the vernacular media was frequently being used as a propaganda machinery by the ULFA organisation.

The CO carried out an aerial helicopter reconnaissance on 05 September 2005 to assess the movements of civilian boats all along the Brahmaputra River flowing North of the DSRF and River Dangori along the South of the DSRF and all the streams flowing within the forest and the area of operations. Not a single civilian boat was found to be moving and area domination on the ground as well as the water was total. The author briefed the Brigade Commander and General Officer Commanding about the ongoing operations, who insisted that he stop the operation as it was drawing a lot of adverse media publicity, especially through the vernacular press. Pressure had also started to be exerted from a hastily formed People's Consultative Group (PCG) on 08 September 2005 under the guidance of ULFA SS COAS Paresch Baruah, who had started exerting pressure on the Central and State Government to stop the Army operation in DSRF and offered to start talks with the government. The PCG was headed by Mamoni Indira Goswami, and the other members were journalist Ajit Baruah, Hyder Hussain, Diganta Konwar, Sports organiser Hiranya Saikia, Dr Brojen Gogoi, Engineer Mukul Mahanta, Lawyer Arup Borbora, Adviser of Manav Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) Lachit Bordoloi, AJYCP leader Dilip Patgiri. On 09 September 2005, the group reached Guijan Ghat and wanted to enter the area of undergoing operation Balwan. The SF was able to convince them to not to enter the area as it would endanger their lives. They returned from Guijan Ghat. Their obvious aim was to disrupt the operation and facilitate the escape of the holed-up ULFA leaders and cadres. The signal was crystal clear that the

operation was hurting ULFA like never before. This strengthened the SF resolve and determination to not to wilt under any pressure but to continue the operation. The hierarchy, meanwhile, understood the game plan of ULFA and the PCG and gave the necessary permission to the unit to continue the operation further. Thus, SF started closing in on the area where the ULFA cadres and leadership were holed up inside the forest.

### **09 September 2005: Two Observation Post Machaans Busted**

Two Observation Post Machaans were busted by a column led by Capt Om Prakash, OC A Company, while the search for the holed-up terrorists was on. A lot of warlike stores were found in the machaan. The resources of ULFA were dwindling, their radio set batteries were drying up, and they were starving for food. They were desperate for outside help, but it was not forthcoming due to the heavy presence of Security Forces all around their locations inside the forest. Electronic intercepts indicated that the group had split into two after the 03 September encounter. A few cadres went missing as they had jumped into fast flowing Brahmaputra River in desperation. One group was led by SS Lt Jiten Dutta, and the other was SS Lt Achintya Saikia, who was the SS Finance Secretary of ULFA and was the Officiating SS Battalion Commander of 28 Battalion ULFA in the absence of SS Capt Mrinal Hazarika.

In the meantime, more units were inducted into the operations, but they were all assigned the tasks of occupying posts vacated by the sub-units of 4 JAT outside DSRF and relieving the troops for operations inside the forest.

### **10 September 2005: Encounter No 2: One Terrorist Killed**

While the search operations were on for apprehending the holed-up terrorists inside the thick jungles, there was some suspicious movement observed by the search party commander,

Naib Subedar Gulab Singh of Ghatak platoon, on the morning of 10 September 2005. As the search party closed in on the location where the suspicious movement was observed, Naib Subedar Gulab Singh and Company Havildar Major Atrup Singh came under intense automatic small arms fire. They returned fire in the direction and spotted a terrorist firing from behind a tree in the thick vegetation. The search party soon neutralised the terrorist, and everything went quiet after the terrorist was shot dead. It seemed that when the encounter took place on 03 September 2005, this cadre had lost contact with the group, and he was injured in the previous operation. The complete area was then scanned for the presence of any other ULFA cadre. No trace of any other ULFA leader or cadre was found. The slain terrorist was later identified as SS Private Himanshu Bora, belonging to Sadia village. One rifle, an AK-56, two magazines, 25 live rounds of ammunition, one hand grenade, and a few fired cartridges were found in the area of the encounter. So, one confirmed killing of an ULFA terrorist had taken place about ten days into the operations. There were at least two terrorists killed during the encounter on 03 September 2005 and their dead bodies were later found on the river bed in December 2005 as the river water levels went down, Both the bodies were identified due to the Casio wrist watches they were putting on which were surprisingly working and had their details like name, village and police station fed into them (probably used as an identification mark by ULFA). This was a period of intense search operations in the difficult terrain. The search operations were mostly speculative and based on the analysis of radio messages that were intercepted by the SF Electronic Warfare detachments and interpretation by the two surrendered ULFA cadres who were operating with the battalion. This period ended with the formation of PCG by ULFA, raising of lots of hue and cry through proxy organisations on behalf of ULFA, such as MASS, etc. There were attempts to scuttle the operations by aggressive protests alleging the SF of Human Rights

violations against the villagers of the Laika group of villages. This period marked the beginning of a deceptive lull in the battle.

### Phase 3: Deceptive Lull--Test of Patience/Perseverance

(11 September - 20 September 2005)

After the encounter on 10 September 2005, what followed was—apparent silence as observed on the surface<sup>ll</sup> but the recoveries made from the slain terrorist gave firm grounds to believe that it was a time to persevere and read the ongoing developments. The entire machinery had to withstand the tremendous pressures arising due to the media campaign by the adversary and also false propaganda to mislead the concerned officials holding important offices. The leads from intercepts from inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest had dried up, probably due to a lack of batteries and no forthcoming supply.

Developments till now and Electronic Warfare intercepts had confirmed the presence of two groups of terrorists, which had separated out by design or by default. One was being led by SS Lt Achintya Saikia (Finance Secretary and Officiating Battalion Commander 28 Battalion ULFA) and the other led by SS Lt Jiten Dutta (OC Charlie Company, 28 Battalion ULFA). While the former was known to have eight to ten cadres with him, the latter had about six to eight cadres. One group had made its way towards Ajuka Village so as to mingle with the civil population there. These inputs prompted the author to deploy one of the SF columns under Major Rajiv Ghosh, Company Commander Charlie Company in the vicinity of Ajuka village to keep the complete area under active surveillance. The Battalion Headquarters was shifted to a makeshift cow shed at Baluchar Mukh with an administrative base in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, based out of a Forest Department large motor boat with an ability to deliver administrative needs to the columns

involved in active operations with utmost speed. One column was placed at Pomua Laika village to ensure that none of the holed-up cadres could get into the village or no villager could provide administrative support, including delivery of food and water to the terrorists. All the major streams were patrolled by boat columns to dominate all the possible entry or exit points. This was done with an aim to isolate the holed-up ULFA cadres from outside support or assistance.

Lack of radio intercepts from inside the forest area dried up intelligence inputs for the SF columns too. There seemed to be total radio silence, and there was a deceptive lull. The SF columns dominated the area with the hope of seeking encounters with the holed-up ULFA cadres and leaders. At this juncture, the surrendered ULFA cadres accompanying the battalion provided very authentic inputs from the intercepts or inputs from vernacular press media by very accurately analysing each and every input, as they had earlier been on the other side and could understand the mindset and thought process of the terrorists and their leaders. Every time there was a radio intercept, they would analyse the author and the intended message being conveyed. There were radio messages emanating from outside stations that all the cadres had successfully been evacuated from the forest area, and the Army was just wasting its time and efforts searching for them. On receipt of this message, the surrendered ULFA cadres advised the author that this message was intended to distract the SF with the aim of stopping the operation.

On 14 September 2005, members of PCG formed by the ULFA threatened to pull out of the negotiation initiative in the event of —unprovoked and unwarranted|| army operations against the ULFA. This was being done at the behest of ULFA, as the pressure was mounting on the ULFA leadership at the highest level to extricate the holed-up ULFA senior leaders and cadres from the

forest by stopping Operation Balwan. Further, on the same day, ULFA SS Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, in a press statement through email, said that 12 of the outfit's cadres had been killed by the Army during the ongoing operations in Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest. The Times of India amongst other newspapers, in its report on 15 September 2005, —ULFA threatens to pull out from Peace Process, mentioned that while Manav Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) sought United Nations intervention to stop the Army operation, ULFA SS Chairman said such action by the military would force his organisation to —review its decision to hold a dialogue with the Centre. Army authorities, however, denied that 12 cadres were killed by the Army. This statement by the authorities was issued based on the facts on the ground, which were ascertained from the author, who was deployed and operating inside the forest. An assessment was made by the SF that these actions by ULFA and its mouthpiece organisations, PCG and MASS, were taken to pressurise the government to stop the ongoing operations to provide breathing space to the holed-up ULFA militants. PCG claimed that they had approached the PMO, MoD, and the Chief Minister of Assam to stop the operations in the forest immediately.

Allegations were also made that the Army in the garb of the operation, was harassing villagers. The image of the army was being tarnished by making false allegations to force SF to pull out on humanitarian grounds. There was an attempt to initiate a *dharna* campaign to raise public outcry about the inconvenience caused by this operation.

### **Corps Commander Visits the Operational Area**

Amidst all the attempts by ULFA and its mouthpiece organisations, pressure was also felt in the Higher Headquarters of the Army. Accordingly, to get a first-hand account of matters

on the ground, Lt Gen Hardev Singh Lidder, GOC 4 Corps visited the area of operation inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest on 15 September 2005. He was briefed about the operations till date by the author. The visit of the Corps Commander to the unit gave a much-needed fillip to the already charged-up team of officers, JCOs, and men of the unit.

A quick assessment of the situation was made by the Corps Commander based on the ground inputs. It was clear that there was a coordinated attempt by the ULFA and its ilk to scuttle the operation to rescue the trapped ULFA leaders and cadres. ULFA had accused the unit of having killed twelve of their cadres and that a very senior leader was part of the twelve killed and their bodies thrown into the Brahmaputra River. The list included the name of SS Lt Achintya Saikia, Finance Secretary and officiating Battalion Commander of 28 Battalion of ULFA. This indicated to SF the names of people who were holed up in the forest.

The group led by SS Lt Jiten Dutta alias Moon Bora had probably escaped from the forest during the day of Vishwakarma Puja on the night of 16/17 September 2005. This was confirmed by him to the author in the year 2011, when the former had already surrendered, and during a telephonic conversation, I had asked him about his experience of Operation Balwan and as to how and when he had escaped. He mentioned that there was an army column around that area but since there was a puja festivity going on, the army had maintained a clear distance from the spot. His group took advantage of the religious activity to escape and mingle with the locals.

## Phase 4: The Knockout Blow (20 September 2005 Onwards)

### 20 September 2005: Encounter No 3 (Finance Secretary and Officiating Battalion Commander 28 Battalion ULFA Killed)

#### Perseverance Pays

In one of the greatest successes of all time, SS Lt Achintya Saikia, Finance Secretary and Battalion Commander 28 Battalion ULFA, with one female cadre, Ms Janvi Gogoi, was killed in this encounter that occurred after a lull of nine days.

The Union Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, while on a visit to Dimapur, addressed the media and stated that —Army operations against ULFA would continue as there was no ceasefire in place with the proscribed outfit. He said, “How can you do that when we do not have any ceasefire in place?”

At about 3.30 PM on 20 September 2005, one villager from Ajuka village informed Major Rajiv Ghosh, OC Charlie Company, deployed with his column in the vicinity of Ajuka village, about the presence of two-armed ULFA cadres in the village Ajuka. Major Rajiv Ghosh immediately ordered Subedar Prem Singh and Havildar Arjun Ram to move with his party and establish stops at suitable locations. At about 4.20 PM both the stops were in location led by Subedar Prem Singh and Havildar Arjun Ram. At the same time search column led by Major Rajiv Ghosh started advancing towards the place indicated by the villager. At about 4.30 pm, while the search party was on the move, they came under intense fire from the Jungle. Retaliatory fire was brought down on the firing terrorists. The terrorists tried to break contact and started running into the Jungle. Major Rajiv Ghosh took control of the situation and organised a pursuit of fleeing terrorists. At about 4.45 PM, the terrorist who was firing indiscriminately towards the search column was spotted. Major Rajiv Ghosh and Naib Subedar Ajit

Singh provided covering fire to each other and closed on the firing terrorist. The terrorist lobbed a grenade in their direction, but Naib Subedar Ajit Singh, showing exemplary gallantry and unmindful of personal safety, charged towards the terrorist while firing from his weapon and killed him. The other terrorist ran towards the stop established by Subedar Prem Singh. Subedar Prem Singh spotted the terrorist and killed her. The Company Quick Reaction Team reached the encounter site at 5 pm. An extensive search was conducted under the supervision of Major Rajiv Ghosh.

The two terrorists killed were identified as SS Lt Achintya Saikia, Finance Secretary 28 Battalion ULFA R/O Rupai. (He was officiating as Battalion Commander 28 Battalion ULFA in the absence of SS Capt Mrinal Hazarika) and SS Private Jahnvi Gogoi alias Sonamo Konwar, resident of Sibsagar.

The recoveries from the encounter site included a 7.62mm pistol, an AK-56 rifle, live ammunition, two satellite phones (with 'Cdr' inscribed on one and 'Cdr 28 Bn' on the other), Indian currency Rs 11000/-, Dictaphones, two ULFA stamps with stamp pads, a dictionary, and a lot of other war-like stores.

It was learnt that a terrorist was injured who managed to escape. The two Satellite phones recovered were sent for perusal of the COAS, who at the time was visiting HQ 4 Corps at Tezpur. They were taken over by intelligence units of Army Headquarters for further intelligence analysis.

An interesting thing that happened as a result of this encounter was the exposure of ULFA SS Chairman's blatant lie that the Army had ruthlessly killed twelve cadres and leaders and thrown them into the Brahmaputra River (through a press briefing on 14 September 2005). The list of the killed had included Achintya Saikia, too. So, the SF we had killed Achintya Saikia twice in the past week. A news article appeared in the press, too. (Purvanchal

Prahari on 23 September 2005, covered in its headline “Sena ne ULFA commander ki do baar goli maar kar hatya kari?”

The lull in the operations had been broken with the killing of one of the senior-most leaders of ULFA in this operation. The operation assumed national importance, and the actions of perseverance by the Army had strengthened the Central Government’s position manifold in its endeavor to tighten the noose on the proscribed organisation ULFA.

The operations continued with a renewed vigour. The patience and perseverance had paid off. The killing of SS Lt Achintya Saikia with a female cadre on one hand had jolted the ULFA organisation, and on the other, it was a big morale booster to SF troops who had been untiringly toiling in the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest for about three weeks now. The adversities of weather, anxiety, unpredictability and psychological aspects had slowly been taking its toll on the morale of our troops, although no one was complaining.

There were lots of ULFA-promoted agitations taking place all over Tinsukia District. There was yet another attempt by ULFA to stop the operation at any cost. This spurt of activities prompted the SF to believe that there were still a few cadres holed up inside the forest. Meanwhile, the PCG was urging the Centre to speed up the peace process. The Centre was prepared for talks but laid the condition that the hostilities had to stop from both sides.

On 22 September 2005, Union Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee told the media at Rangia in Assam that ground rules had to be framed before any kind of peace negotiation between the ULFA and the Union Government.

Meanwhile, on 22 September 2005, eight hardcore overground workers of ULFA were apprehended from Laika village. The

apprehension of these men delivered a strong blow to the overground activities of ULFA.

Radio intercepts revealed that SS Lt Jiten Dutta, along with a few of his cadres, had managed to escape from the jungle, but a few were still holed up inside the forest. It was therefore logical to continue the operation unhindered despite attempts by the local populace and ULFA mouthpiece organisations to stall the operations.

### **26 September 2005: Encounter No 4 – Two Hard Core ULFA Cadres Killed**

The appreciation that a few cadres were still trapped inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest came true as the unit delivered yet another blow to the outfit. In another encounter with the ULFA, two ULFA hardcore leaders identified as SS Lance Corporal Nilim Kumar, resident of Tengakhat village, and SS Private Hiren Dahotia alias Akhil Bruk Chetia, resident of Raidang village, Police Station Dumduma, were killed near Ajuka village by Charlie Company led by Major Rajiv Ghosh. In a fierce encounter, SF were able to eliminate these two terrorists. This was yet another blow to the already dwindling and sagging morale of ULFA leadership.

- **Army Operations to Stop, Troops to Stay**

Annihilation of the group of ULFA leaders and cadres holed up inside Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest, a safe haven for the past many years, was almost complete. The army had achieved its aim of —arm twisting‖ ULFA leadership to join the peace process through a sustained operation inside ULFA’s safest haven. On 27 September 2005, an Army spokesperson in Guwahati stated that the forest was —cleared of all ultras‖ and the task had been successfully accomplished, and hence the army operation code-

named Operation Balwan had been called off, however, the troops will guard the forest to keep it under its vigil.

- **Commencement of Peace Process between the Centre and ULFA**

PCG submitted a memorandum to Assam Chief Minister, Mr Tarun Gogoi, to withdraw the Army from the forest. Within two days, the plea of the PCG was accepted, and Operation Balwan was called off on the orders of PMO. An invitation was extended to the PCG by the PMO for a meeting on 26 October 2005 to be attended by Mr Manmohan Singh, the PM, to discuss the modalities of the peace process between the Centre and ULFA (represented by PCG). At the meeting, the PCG briefed the government delegation led by Mr MK Narayanan, National Security Adviser, on the significance of the exercise and the dire need for restraint by the government and the ULFA for the success of peace talks. The session with the PM and CM Gogoi started with a written proposal from the PCG saying that sovereignty was the —core issue that must be discussed for resolution of the conflict with ULFA. After giving a hearing to the PM replied, saying that dialogue could resolve the conflict. He mentioned that he was first a representative of the people of Assam, being elected to the Rajya Sabha from the state, and then the PM.

Hence, started a peace process was started between the banned organization ULFA and the Centre, prompted by a dogged operation appropriately code-named Operation Balwan.

- **Impact of Operation Balwan**

Operation Balwan was launched at a time when ULFA leadership was trying to coerce the government to talk to ULFA on the issue of sovereignty, release of its ten jailed leaders from Bangladesh, Indian jails, and Bhutan, and seeking details of missing ULFA leaders since Operation All Clear (Bhutan

Operations) of December 2003. The highest leadership of ULFA was almost threatening the Centre to hold peace talks on their terms and conditions. While stating all this, ULFA had stepped up violence in the state of Assam as if to coerce the government into giving in to their demands. The success of the operation prompted ULFA to hastily constitute a nine-member PCG on 08 September 2005, and the PCG held its first meeting on 11 September 2005, within three days of its formation. ULFA leadership came under tremendous pressure as their important leaders and cadres got trapped in the reserve forest, and there seemed to be no way to extricate them from the jungle. The surprise element of the operation, coupled with an unconventional approach, shocked the ULFA cadres in their own backyard. They were totally isolated from the world outside the reserve forest and were deprived of all the food and other necessities. As the time passed and the operation progressed, the cadres trapped inside the forest were totally isolated and demoralized. Their will to fight had diminished over a period of time as the operations continued unabated for a period beyond their imagination. The batteries dried up, thereby depriving them of communications from the other cadres who could provide them with help and food. Constant firing and illuminating of jungles by night put in a fear psychosis in their minds as never before. The top leadership got desperate as the Centre's power of bargaining strengthened due to the success of the army operations. The tide turned against the ULFA leadership, and they were literally on their knees accepting peace talks in any form provided the operation inside the forest was halted by the Centre, albeit with an intention to regroup.

The government seized the opportunity with both hands and laid down the terms and conditions for the talks, and invited PCG for talks and a meeting with the PM. Although the peace process did not last long, the psychological impact of the operation lasted

in the minds of the ULFA leadership. They had earlier adopted the tactics of operating from bases inside the thick forests, which they always considered as their safe havens. They were no longer safe in the forests.

## Lessons Learnt

Operation BALWAN has given a lot to learn from. At the same time, it has to be understood that the adversary will also definitely learn from his sufferings during the operation.

- **Instant Early Warning: Satellite Cadres.** One or a maximum of two cadres were placed at first light at suitable access routes to give Early Warning. They acted as satellites and gave adequate reaction time to those present inside. One such location of a satellite was Laika village for the camps found inside. They used to withdraw at the last light.
- **Survival Instincts Of The Human Beings Can Not Be Underestimated:** After having been trapped for nearly a month, the terrorists could survive in the jungle, which proves that it is possible to live off the land for a longer duration than perceivable.
- **ULFA cadres don't leave the General Area:** They, on having been threatened to run, will not go far but remain in the vicinity and fall back at a suitable opportunity. This was quite evident from the four encounters that took place during the operations.
- **Well Sited Camp:** The camps were so well sited that they could not be identified even standing five meters away from it. The access to the camps was very difficult, and achieving complete surprise was next to impossible.
- **Move With Certain Stores:** When they leave the camp to

get an Early Warning of Security Forces approaching, they move with certain stores that include rations for a few days, weapons, and money that could sustain them for some days.

MASS, vernacular media, and various student unions are its mouthpieces.

ULFA is capable of evoking dharnas and disruptive activities through coercion and various pseudo-orgs like MASS, Muttock-Moran Student Unions, and local dailies.

### Lessons Learnt From Others' Mistakes

A thorough study of numerous operations launched on previous occasions had made the SF learn that-

- Don't restrict the operation to any definite time limit.
- Don't force any readymade end.
- Don't fall prey to the misleading propaganda by the mouthpieces of ANEs.
- Don't take the intercepts in a literal sense, but carry out a detailed analysis for taking further decisions.
- Ensure complete isolation of the ANEs and seal their supplies.
- They will certainly fall back to the same gen area.
- They can sustain in isolation for far more days than we may appreciate.
- Big Things Come in Small Packets.

The operation was launched on a small intelligence input pertaining to the movement of 50 pencil cells, but intelligent analysis of the input led the SF to an operation of such a large magnitude that it became an operation of National value.

It continued on small tips/leads obtained on daily basis through EW intercepts and news as reported in the vernacular media. In fact, the mouthpieces of ULFA gave a fair idea what the ULFA want the SF to believe to make easier its other tasks of extricating the cadres and diverting the mind.

### Intelligent Appreciation and Decision Making

All small leads in light of all available background information have to be roped in together to arrive at a logical decision. The SF approach in this regard had been exactly that, and the position of stops all around the DIBRU SAIKHOWA RF proved so effective in sealing the RF.

The following play a very important role in arriving at the decision-making-

- **Thorough Recce:** Virtually no appreciation can be carried out without a thorough recce of the area. The last two months, since relocation of the unit had been completely dedicated to this facet only, and this was the time to reap the dividends.
- **Intelligence Network:** A comprehensive intelligence network is a basic necessity to formulate any such plan and also in appreciating every information coming in bits and pieces.
- **Deductions From Terrain Analysis and Placing Stops:** The important aspect of isolating the DSRF could not have been achieved without thorough terrain analysis and placement

of correct stops.

- The area of interest was very vast, hence searching through clues became inevitable. Clues that came in bits and pieces required to be analysed before being ignored, assuming them to be futile. No clue is worthless.
- Constant radio intercepts and intelligence analysis were necessary to modify the plan on a required basis.
- Flexibility in the plan, including time period and place, was the key to maintaining the momentum (As it was practiced from the very first day).
- Reading ANE's mind to grab him by the head turned out to be a very successful idea, and it always assured us that the terrorists were just waiting for us to get diverted and succumb to the pressures created.
- Timely assessment of the capabilities of an outfit based on items seized/ recovered is a grave area of concern that, if delayed, has no significance. In the third encounter, the items recovered were soon put together, and when analysed thoroughly, it gave information of high value.
- Secrecy of the operational Plan was maintained in such a manner that even the local population was caught unawares. This could be achieved by acquiring the boats well in advance in some areas and at the last moment in others.
- **Innovative Ideas:** The operation gave a chance to implement a lot of new ideas as envisaged by appreciating the mind of the adversary. In one of the cases, a person as a ruse with a buffalo, was sent to probe the area inside the

jungle.

- **Exploitation of Initial Foothold:** The initial foothold could have been exploited best by getting more troops to seal all other escape routes.
- Optimum Utilisation of Available Resources is a must.
- **DF:** DF should have been used in the early stages when the signal traffic of terrorists in desperation was immense. The results would have been much better.
- Do not Underestimate Adversary. Underestimating the ULFA in physical capability as well as in other regards is a folly. Anyone who can survive for a month in the jungle living off the land is not an organisation to be underestimated.
- **Multidirectional Approach:** All operations on previous occasions were unidirectional and provided easy escape routes through numerous water channels in all opposite directions. Hence, a multi-directional approach this time was very rewarding.
- **EW Intercepts-Correct Interpretation:** EW intercepts were discovered to be a potent weapon throughout. The significant feature is that these were the readymade help lines to make appropriate corrections at all crucial junctures.
- **Assistance by Civil Administration:** Cordial relations between SF and Civil Administration are a must.
- Effective Resource Control left terrorists starving and distressed till the very end of the operation.
- Domination of Population Centers helped SF in isolating the

terrorists from the civil population, thereby ensuring there was no collateral damage while operating.

- **Perseverance Pays:** It was adequately learnt during the operation that perseverance and patience have no alternatives.
- **Psychological Aspect:** The SF harnessed the local support within no time by maintaining a personal touch, empathising with them, and providing all possible help, including medical and monetary aid. It paid dividends in huge magnitude. The villagers started providing the SF with timely inputs about the presence of terrorists in the vicinity, as witnessed during the third and fourth encounters.
- **Deceptive Propaganda:** EW intercepts and false media reports by terrorists should be interpreted well.
- **Vernacular Media:** They should be regularly monitored (as done during OP BALWAN) to assess the mind games being played by the adversary.
- **Patronized Media:** There is no doubt that a patronised media will help tremendously by shaping the public opinion, especially during times of crisis when the need arises to counter the false propaganda campaign by the ANEs.
- **Sharing Information with all concerned units and agencies involved** proved of good worth and definitely gives a conducive atmosphere for operations to succeed.
- **Accuracy in Reporting:** Accurate reporting enables higher commanders to appreciate and make better decisions, as in

the case of the denial of having killed 12 militants of ULFA, as claimed by their leadership.

- **Boldness in Action:** A bold action after calculating the pros and cons should always be taken. e.g., firing of 81mm Mortar, which impacted the will of ULFA cadres adversely to fight.
- **Fire Control:** The live experiences of encounters proved that there is enough scope for improvement as far as fire control is concerned.
- Fortune Favours the brave.

## Conclusion

Operation Balwan stands as a seminal case study in the annals of counter-insurgency (CI) and internal security operations in India. It exemplifies the complex interplay of terrain, intelligence, local dynamics, psychological operations and operational perseverance in asymmetric warfare. The operation, meticulously planned and executed by 4 JAT in the dense and challenging terrain of the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest (DSRF), underscores the evolving strategic paradigms in CI doctrine, especially in the context of India's Northeast insurgencies.

At its core, Operation Balwan was not merely a kinetic military maneuver but a holistic, intelligence-led campaign that integrated multi-dimensional warfare components, ranging from real-time electronic warfare (EW) intercepts and human intelligence (HUMINT) to civil-military cooperation and information warfare. The operation's initial trigger, a low-signature intelligence input regarding 50 pencil cells, demonstrates the criticality of micro-intelligence and its potential to catalyse macro-level strategic

outcomes when fused with diligent situational analysis and terrain appreciation.

The operation's success hinged upon multiple interdependent variables: complete tactical surprise, effective sealing of ingress and egress points through topographical understanding, psychological dominance over insurgents, and leveraging surrendered ULFA cadres for interpretive intelligence. The operation effectively neutralized a historically secure insurgent safe haven, thereby depriving ULFA of both territorial sanctuaries and psychological superiority. This demonstrates how deep-penetration operations, supported by adaptable tactical frameworks and decentralised command autonomy, can overcome even the most fortified insurgent logistics and morale infrastructures.

Strategically, the impact of Operation Balwan extended beyond the immediate tactical victories. It successfully dislocated ULFA's command hierarchy, disrupted their operational tempo, and psychologically demoralised their rank and file. The resultant formation of the People's Consultative Group (PCG) and the hastened initiation of a peace dialogue with the Government of India signified a crucial turning point in state-insurgent engagement dynamics. It also highlighted how sustained military pressure, coupled with socio-political engagement, can recalibrate insurgent behaviour and open avenues for political resolution.

Moreover, the operation exposed the critical role of media, both as a weapon and a vulnerability in modern CI operations. The manipulation of vernacular press by insurgent mouthpieces such as MASS underscores the necessity of developing strategic communication frameworks within military operations to counter adversarial narratives and maintain legitimacy among local populations and broader public opinion.

In conclusion, Operation Balwan reaffirms several doctrinal imperatives for contemporary CI strategies: (1) terrain-oriented and intelligence-driven planning, (2) multi-directional and multi-domain operational synchronisation, (3) empathetic civil-military coordination to isolate insurgents from civilian support, and (4) psychological perseverance that outlasts the insurgents' will to resist. The operation exemplifies the value of small-unit leadership, situational flexibility, and strategic patience in executing CI missions with national-level implications. As India continues to grapple with varied internal security challenges, Operation Balwan offers enduring lessons in counter-insurgency, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive, integrated, and adaptive approach to modern irregular warfare.

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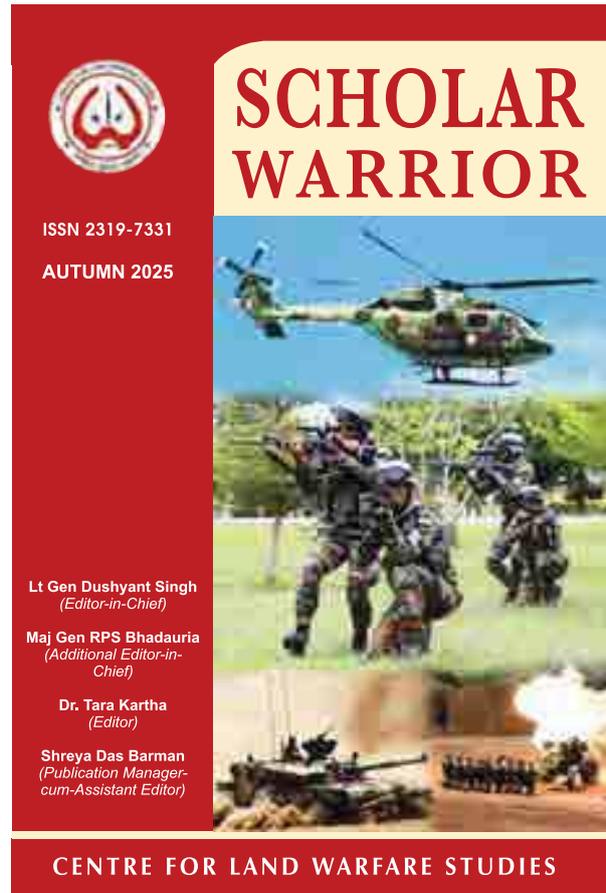
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This paper undertakes a systematic case study of Operation BALWAN, a large-scale counter-insurgency operation conducted by the Indian Army in the Dibru Saikhowa Reserve Forest, Assam, in 2005. It examines the operational design, intelligence fusion, and tactical execution that enabled the neutralisation of a long-standing insurgent stronghold of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Particular attention is given to the role of intelligence-led operations, including the integration of electronic warfare intercepts, human intelligence, and terrain analysis within a complex riverine and forested environment. The study further analyses the employment of psychological operations, civil–military coordination, and resource denial strategies in isolating insurgents from civilian support. Beyond its immediate operational outcomes, the paper situates Operation BALWAN within India's broader counter-insurgency doctrine, arguing that the operation contributed significantly to strategic pressure on ULFA and facilitated the initiation of a subsequent peace process. The findings offer doctrinal insights relevant to contemporary asymmetric warfare and internal security operations.

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