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## We can now give others a lesson or two - Air Force chief

by Dhaneshi YATAWARA



### Air Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke RWP & bar, usp, ndc, psc

Sri Lanka Air Force Commander Air Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke joined the Sri Lanka Air Force as an Officer Cadet in the General Duties Pilot Branch on January 13, 1978. On successful completion of flying training, he was commissioned in the rank of Pilot Officer on August 24, 1979.

Air Marshal Goonetilleke graduated from the Air Command and Staff College, Air University, Alabama, USA in 1994 and also attended the prestigious National Defence College in Pakistan in 2001.

He was also the Director of Operations/Deputy Chief of Staff Operations of the Air Force before being appointed the Chief of Staff.

During his illustrious career of 28 years, he has held a number of command, operational and administrative positions. He also served as an Operational Pilot, Commanding Officer of No. 03 Maritime Squadron and the Commanding Officer of No. 04 Helicopter Wing. In recognition of his distinguished career, he has been awarded the Uttama Seva Padakkama. For the bravery displayed in conducting operations he has been awarded the Gallantry Medal 'Rana Wickrama Padakkama' twice.

Pic : Rukmal Gamage

**Q:** How do you

### Former Air Force Commanders since inception...

- \* Air Commodore GC Bladon - from May 05, 1950 - October 24, 1958
- \* Air Vice Marshal J. L. Barker - from October 24, 1958 - November 12, 1962
- \* Air Vice Marshal Rohan Amarasekara - from November 12, 1962 - December 31, 1970
- \* Air Chief Marshal Pathman (Paddy) Mendis - From January 01, 1971 - November 01, 1976
- (Became the Commander of the Air Force at the age of 38 years and the youngest Commander of an Armed Forces in Ceylon)
- \* Air Chief Marshal Harry Goonetilleke - from November 01, 1976 - April 30, 1981
- \* Air Vice Marshal Dick Cuthbert Perera - From May 01, 1981 - April 30, 1985
- \* Air Chief Marshal Walter Fernando - From May 01, 1985 - July 31, 1990
- \* Air Chief Marshal M.J.T. de Gunawardena - From February 16, 1990 - February 16, 1994
- \* Air Chief Marshal Oliver Ranasinghe - From February 17, 1994 - March 05, 1998
- \* Air Chief Marshal J Weerakkody - From March 06, 1998 - July 15, 2002
- \* Air Chief Marshal Donald Perera - From July 16, 2002 - June 11, 2006

explain the growth of the Sri Lanka Air Force since the ethnic war started in the country?

**A:** We have come a long way. Especially, since 2006 we have been able to force the LTTE to a standstill, I would say. Mostly we operate in support of the advancing troops of the Sri Lanka Army and the Navy. We were able to weaken LTTE's fire-power drastically in the recent past. Considering the past two to three years, we have largely improved especially in the areas of attacking power, weapons even in the internal management of the

force. The Air Force which was relatively a small outfit has developed into a full-fledged fighting force during the last 58 years. As we are developing country we have our own limitations to expand. Yet, we have used our resources effectively and judiciously causing maximum damage to the enemy.

**Q:** Seven airstrips constructed by the LTTE were found in Vanni during the recent military operations. How do you assess the air-power of the Outfit?

**A:** Out of the total number of we can identify only two as standard air strips. Others are either to mislead the Air Force or temporary points used for training. Like the one that

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was found in Paranthan, the LTTE had done up the road to make us believe that it was an air strip. Since the LTTE aircraft are small they don't need a long air strip to take off.

**Q:** How do you explain LTTE's air capabilities?

**A:** Definitely the LTTE can't win the war with the type of air attacks they have launched and those small air craft they possess. Yet we have to admit they can become a sort of menace. With the recent two aircraft, we have destroyed three of the LTTE aircraft so far. The other one was destroyed over Iranamadu jungles during a previous attack. The LTTE airwing cannot pose any serious threat to the country but it can cause damage and that's what they are doing! Even the highly advanced versions of aircraft in the world will find it difficult to destroy such small aircraft. Compared to the damage we have inflicted to the LTTE the chaos created by them are not that big.

**Q:** Why did the Air Force fail to destroy the LTTE aircraft until the recent suicide mission?

**A:** We can't consider it a failure. Throughout we were making every effort to destroy these aircraft. Though they undertook daring missions earlier the LTTE couldn't reach any of their actual targets. We managed to minimize the damage to the lowest possible level. Now we are capable of withstanding any such terrorist attacks in future. If someone claims that the LTTE owns a highly advanced airpower, I would say the Colombo Flying Club could be more advanced!

**Q:** What is the present strength of the Air Force in both men and machine?

**A:** An Air Force depends very much on its technology. When it comes to strategies, skills of the people becomes an important factor. And at present, we are capable of independently manoeuvring our surveillance according to our security requirements. Our beach-craft and the UAVs are on surveillance for 6-7 hours at a stretch. Round the clock we are alert on the enemy movements. Whenever there is an emergency call from the Army or the Navy we are ever ready to provide assistance without any delay at all. The MI24 aircraft squadron gives a lot of support for the advancing troops to break the enemy line. The MiG, Kfir, F7 squadrons have caused severe damages to the LTTE's Sea Tiger bases and other buildups. This has definitely weakened their fire power to a great extent.

**Q:** How do you compare the present day pilots with those who were there when you joined the Air Force?

**A:** The characteristics of our pilots are same as ever. Their prowess is of course second to none. With the progressive development of aircraft technology our pilots became sharper. Operating in a ruthless anti-terrorist war, our pilots have acquired a superb experience which enable them to be classed with the veterans in the field.

**Q:** If fighting is the core area of Air Force how do you explain your services in the periphery?

**A:** Our defensive and offensive roles are the main priorities. But welfare of our airmen and their female counterparts as well as our duty to the citizens are also our prime responsibilities. Evacuation of Army casualties from the battle ground is one of the prime duties entrusted to us. In any weather conditions, or any adverse circumstances our pilots and airmen are ready to accept challenges and perform their mission bravely. To the welfare of airmen and women, the Seva Vanitha Unit is dedicated in contributing its lot. It's actually a great assistance since our routine duties do not give us space to look into those matters. Caring for the wounded and the disabled and supporting needy families of SLAF personnel provide considerable mental relief for those in the battlefield. Apart from involving in combats we have taken the responsibility of transporting essential goods when the necessity arises - especially to the Northern Peninsula where the road access was cut off for a long period. Transporting troops on holiday and providing food and medicine for them is another main area. A major portion of our troop carrier aircraft and man-power is dedicated to this duty. Especially troops deployed in the Jaffna Peninsula were facing great difficulties in transport before the A9 was cleared. It was a main concern of ours.

Our Ground Regiment plays a vital role in consolidating power in the cleared areas. Supporting IDPs who are being resettled in those areas is another duty we have undertaken. Our men are helping these people in their agriculture work and many other livelihood activities including providing them with medical care.

**Q:** What is the future of the Air Force, in your perspective?

**A:** At present, we have a strong base to grow up as a vibrant security arm. We are fortified with a highly talented, skilled crew with a great personality and morale. This is something which we can't buy overnight like the hi-tech equipment. The brains behind the operators matters a lot. The experience we gained during this war against terrorism is more valuable than anything else. This is a unique situation we are facing. So far we were learning from foreign war experts but now we are in a position to give the world, lessons on curbing terrorism. Even if the conventional war ends, our duties won't fade away. We have to keep surveillance over our skies if we are to safeguard our territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country.

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