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TROOPS OPEN A9

## Sigh of relief on sweat and blood

Text and pix by Shanika SRIYANANDA from Elephant Pass

Captain Indika Gamage is one of the happiest among the lot. It was special as he was about to return home on leave on the same road that he had fought the terrorists barely two months ago. He recalled how the troops of the 55 Division advanced from Muhamale to capture the Elephant Pass (EPS) while the troops of the 58 Division pushed the LTTE from the EPS.



Triumphant troops gearing to ply on A9 after 24 years.

years. Apart from his contribution to free the road from the LTTE, he was happy that the security forces were able to open the road so soon.

The National flag together with the colourful regimental flags of the Sri Lanka Army were rhythmically fluttering in the crystal clear blue sky over the EPS while the pirith chanted by three Buddhist monks - Ven. Meegahadure Sirivimala, Ven. Thalalle Dhammadeva and ~~Dehipe Vanarathana~~ vibrated in the once terror filled land.

It followed a brief religious ceremony attended by the Jaffna Security Forces Commander Maj. Gen. Mendaka Samarasinghe, 55 GOC Brig. Prasanna Silva, 51 GOC Brig. Priyantha Jayasundera, Brig. Lalith Abeywardena and other senior army officers.

Staff Sergeant Gunawardena of the Mechanized Infantry said that he and his colleagues were happy as they could go home soon. "Earlier, going home for the vacation was a hassle and tiring task. Sometimes we stayed at transit camps for days due to delay in flights", he said. The soldiers, who fought in fierce battle fronts, had to struggle to go home. It was not easy until the Army opened the A-9. Capt. Perera had to travel from Muhamale to Kankasanturei and then to Palali to catch a flight to Ratmalana to get to his home town Kandy.

"Today itself I can go home," sighed Capt. Perera, who previously made tiring journeys to Kandy for the last 10 years.

Not only Capt. Gamage and Sergeant Gunawardena, the Jaffna Security Forces (SF) Commander Maj.Gen. Mendaka Samarasinghe was also happy and proud to open the linkage to the mainland to cut down expenditure on air and sea to transport the soldiers from and to Jaffna Peninsula.

It was not just another day for the soldiers as well as all of us. It was the historical opening of the 'gateway' to Jaffna - the Alfa 9 (A9).

Waiting with his luggage, Capt. Gamage was to travel along the A-9, the highway that connects Jaffna and Kandy which is now opened to transport troops after 24-

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"Opening of the A-9 is one of the biggest achievements of the military. In the past, these soldiers took more than three days to reach their homes. Today, most of them can do so the same day", the Northern SF Commander, who recalled how he took the Yal Devi from EPS to Paranthan to Kilinochchi, echoed.

### Together

Most importantly, he said that the feeling among the soldiers that their world was shut from the rest of the country was no more. "All of them now know that the Northern part of the island is not separated. This gives us a feeling that we are together" he said.



Capt. Perera



Capt. Indika Gamage

With the capturing of the EPS, which was completely liberated after 10 years of LTTE domination, opening of the A-9 to soldiers has become possible. The LTTE had illegally taxed innocent civilians who plied on the A-9. The LTTE tax collection centres were at Omanthai and Muhamalei. The Tigers never used the tax - the hard earned money of the people of the North - for the development of the roads or the infrastructure, but pumped it to strengthen their fire power.

The A-9, which stretches upto 321 kilo metres, connects Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Medawachchiya, Anuradhapura, Dambulla and Matale. With the escalation of the fight between the military and the LTTE the A9 was closed in 1984 and the LTTE blasted the `Yaldevi` train and the rail track in Murukandi, Kilinochchi in 1985. The A-9 highway was frequently captured by the LTTE and they overran the Army detachment in Kokavil in 1990. The entry exit point at Muhamale on the A-9 highway was closed with the Pooneryn defence.

### Breached

The A-9 was again opened upto Kilinochchi from Omanthai after the signing of the Norwegian brokered CFA in 2002. The Tigers breaching the CFA, systematically attacked the troops and civilians to provoke the military for offensives. The situation worsened as terrorists attacked the troops at Muhamale entry/exit point. This led to the closure of the A-9 again.

Like all recent military victories, capturing of the EPS and the A-9 did not happen miraculously. They did not have a cake walk, but the harvest reaped through their sheer sweat and blood which took them forward inch by inch. The soldiers have braved the sun and the rain to achieve these victories.

Each battle has its scars and bitter memories to depict the war. The A-9 has no exception. The remnants of the old Dutch military camp which was overrun by the LTTE in 1999, the sign board of the Elephant Pass, and the old mini tankers by the sides of the remnants of the military camp were the symbols of the war that demonstrate the horror under LTTE control.

### Hasalaka's bravery

Other than the Elephant Pass debacle and decade long closure of A-9, the most only thing that strikes every ones mind is the bravery of the famous Hasalaka Gamini, who jumped into a bulldozer driven by two suicide LTTE cadres who came to destroy the Southern defence lines of the Elephant Pass (EPS) Base in July 1991. While his brave act of sacrificing his life remains a legend, the brave soldiers of our times marked yet another milestone linking the South and North by capturing the gateway to the North - A-9 along the EPS on January 9. Before it was opened to troops, minefields were cleared and the highway repaired.

This land route that divided the Sinhalese from the Tamils for decades is no more. Like the soldiers of the Northern battle front plying on the A-9, the people of the North and South will surely travel on A-9 soon.

It was 9.02 a.m. on March 2 that the first bus load of soldiers started rolling, marking that historical day. Happiness, pride and bravery were written on their faces. The sea waves were flapping together as they were clapping to honour the brave soldiers. Over

20 buses carried soldiers and officers returning home on leave to Anuradhapura from EPS amidst the chanting of pirith by the Maha Sangha. Over 500 soldiers were transported via A-9. The pirith echoed in the horizon while all the soldiers were given milk rice and sweet meats. The fragrance brought us, over 24 media personnel, hope of seeing a terror free era before long. While the sun became more unkind, the cooling breeze around the soldiers embraced them like in salutation for their great dedication to ending terror filled era.

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