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THE BRAVERY OF 55 DIVISION: The crawl to terminate Sea Tigers

Shanika SRIYANANDA in Chalai



From L to R: Brig. Prasanna Silva, the Deputy GOC Brig. Nissanka Ranawana and the 551 Brigade Commander Col. Mahinda Weerasooriya map out operations in the jungle.

Being just one and half km away from the Tiger's Forward Defence Lines (FDLs), throughout his military operations from Nagarkovil to Muhamalai to Chalai, the 'ops room' cum 'temporary home' of the



A warning sign planted in a mine field

55 Division Chief Brigadier Prasanna Silva, was busy than usual.

Facing more than a dozen LTTE counter attacks successfully on February 27 and March 1 alone, Brig. Silva, minutes before joining his troops to hunt four suicide Tigers infiltrated into Chalai, explained the military thrust to destroy the LTTE's last Sea Tiger domination from Chundikulam to Chalai.

He said that the troops gained full control of Chalai after five days of intense fighting and killing LTTE leaders including deputy Sea Tiger leader Vinayagam.

According to Brig. Silva, unlike in other terrains, fighting along the sea belt was not easy as the troops had to walk on sandy open surface and also facing many suicide attacks.

Recalling the attempt by the Sea Tigers led by Soosai, who was six km away from the troops on March 1, Brig. Silva said that no soldier used a single round of fire as they were instructed to maintain zero casualties.

"We have a slow march because of the civilians", he said while answering urgent calls from the battle front and co-ordinating the troops to comb the jungle for Tigers.

House sparrows, which nestled in GOCs building continuously chirped as they tried to make us feel safe in the land, where fierce fighting had erupted just 24-hours ago. We were to step into the beach front where 10 explosive laden Tiger boats tried to recapture the lagoon between Chalai and the edge of Puthumathalan.

"Better talk to the soldiers who thwarted all these suicide attacks", Brig. Silva said instructing Lt. Col. Deepal Pussella, Commanding Officer (CO) of the 7VIR to take us to the destination.

Equal

We left the 55 Division headquarters - the 'Samajawadhi Kanda' (Socialist camp) where all - from the soldiers to Brig. Silva, were sheltered in equal houses with equal facilities.

A barrage of artillery had exploded few km away from us. While the troops of 55 Division kept on advancing towards Puthumathalan - the state declared safe zone, we stared our journey from Chalai.

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The vehicle first crept into a jungle hide-out where the soldiers were busy repairing all sort of military vehicles. It was their mobile garage. Not long after, we were in the mobile hospital headed by Capt. Dr. Mohamed Niflar who said the `docs` and the medical staff of the 55 Division were always stationed closer to the FDLs and a place where the casualties could be airlifted. "That gives the soldiers courage", he said. His staff, including Capt. Dr. Chinthana Kumara, will treat any battle front injury - AP mines to gun shot injuries. The mobile hospital, which is stocked with necessary drugs, has the facilities for artificial breathing and blood transfusion.

"After treatment they will be sent to Palali or Anuradhapura. Over 95 percent of the soldiers we treated here survived", that is the happiness these Army `docs` enjoy at the end of each medical battle. Next was crossing the Chundikulam lagoon. The instant `boat bridge` built by 6th and 8th Field Engineers, using over 35 fishing fibre boats stretched to over 80 metres connecting Chundikulam North and South facilitating the troops to pass food, medicine weapons and soldiers to the other side; indeed really unique.

Sweltering sun



552 Brigade Commander Col. Kapila Udulupola (front left) and Lt. Col. Deepal Pussella (front right), Commanding Officer (CO) of the 7VIR inspect newly recaptured territory.

No one could tolerate the sweltering sun which burns you on the sand as the soldiers defend the northern coastal belt. There are only stunted coconut trees to shade you for a moment.

Capt. Lakshman Balasooriya of the Mechanized infantry stationed at Chundikulam, said that the China made tankers which could run over 45 km an hour, were used to break 15-foot tall sand bunds of the Tigers as the infantry troops encountered difficulty to fight in the open terrain

and break through the bunds. They destroyed many such obstacles to reach Chalai.

Prawn curry

The bunkers were dotted along the beach front. Mouth watering aroma of a prawn curry intermingled with the awful smell emanating from dead carcasses of dogs and cattle. Lt. Col. Pussalla stopped near a hut for a while. "Putha isso uyalada"? (Son, did you cook prawns?) the 7VIR CO crept into the open kitchen where they had cooked rice and a fish curry. "Naaaaaa Sir" (No Sir). The shy soldier innocently replied. "Some times they cook well and I used to eat with them", he whispered. No wonder the down to earth behaviour of high officials gave courage to the ground soldiers for several leap forwards to destroy the LTTE.

"Be mindful... there is a possibility of a female Black Tiger jumping on to your vehicle", reverberated in my mind as we stepped onto the sandy beach of Chalai where ruminants of the battle - patches of blood, torn Sea Tiger uniforms and live bullets - were strewn all over the beach. Oh... the sudden thundering explosion blew the legs of a cow before our eyes. The animal lost two legs as he was roaming on the minefield.

"If you want to get back to Colombo with your legs intact follow the instructions", was the warning coming from the CO. Over 20 carcasses of cattle and dogs were strewn on the beach. Two cows were still alive and believe. The innocent creatures were tearing, but the soldiers were unable to reach them as it was a deadly minefield.

"We are helpless as we cannot treat them or feed them", said a soldier who threw a bucket of water on the cow to relieve the animal of its pain.

Major Sumal Hemaratne, who led the capturing of Chalai South upto Puthumathalan North and again repulsed a suicide attack to re-capture the stretch said that Tigers used their naval and ground cadres in the attack lasting from mid-night to dawn.

"There were over 13 combined counter attacks but the troops were able to destroy 10 boats and found over 50 dead bodies", he said adding that the significant factor was that the ground troops were able to repulse the Sea Tiger attacks without Naval support.

Soldiers led by Corp. Pushpakumara, who went in to the Tiger FDLs and fought fierce battles with the cadres who ran for life. The troops have captured weapons - T-56s, RPGs, MPMG guns, mortar guns, anti-air guns and suicide kits. They also recovered a motor bike which is believed to be used by Lawrence.



Troops of the 55 Division on the move towards Puthumathalan

Though these soldiers know their lives are at risk more than previous attacks as there are lots of suicide cadres are employed for the LTTE's end battle, the soldiers are fearless. "We are ready to die to see an end of the LTTE. Now the LTTE cannot stop us. The leaders forcefully sent the cadres to the FDLs. Otherwise they are running", they said.

"Are you hungry", asked Lt. Col. Pussella taking us to his residence - the 'eco-spot' which was hidden inside a fine forest cover. It was a buffet like lunch amidst the thundering sounds of artillery fire and continuous round of firing. Believe... this ever smiling CO has a hobby too. He carries his fish tank where ever he goes in the battle front. "They give me relaxation", he smiled.

Back at the North of Puthumathalan, 552 Brigade Commander Col. Kapila Udulupola, who led the troops to capture the area, got the news. "A female cadre had blew herself and other are surrounded". He sighed a relief so as us.

"The Tigers who exploited the seas from Chundikulam to Chalai for over 20 years, never thought, even in their wildest dreams, that the Army would destroy their domination here. They abused this stretch of the coast to attack the Army and Navy, testing their home made ships and submarines, training Sea Tigers and most importantly smuggling arms here.

Though they claimed Chalai was their Naval hub, the Sea Tigers operated from Puthukuduyirippu", Col. Udulupola said explaining how the 551 Brigade completely chased the Tigers in Chalai North with him taking over to destroy the LTTE in Chalai South. Now the troops of 552 were advancing to liberate Puthumathalan.

Stationed just four km away from the edge of the safe zone in Puthumathalan and one and half km to the border of Puthukuduyirippu, Col. Udulupola said the 55 Division troops overcame all the difficulties in their forward march of over 60 km from Nagarkovil to Puthumathalan North.

"The moral of the soldiers is higher than earlier as they know that they are fighting the last battle to wipeout the LTTEers", he said.

The Tigers wanting gain the past glory tried in an desperate suicidal attempt led by Sossai and Vidusha to break through the newly built temporary bridge connecting Chalai South and Puthumathalan North. "While Sea Tiger boats tried to entre the bay mouth of the lagoon, teams led by Lawrence tried to attack the troops to cut off the supply route. They came like a wave, he said.

It was 6 p.m. when we left the coast. Boat squadron consisting of six boats full of infantry soldiers started night patrolling along the stretch. Lance Corp. Samarakoon, a sniper, with his colleague was returning from the Tiger FDL in Puthumathalan concluding a 24-hour continuous hunt for Tigers.

The four-man team and eight-man teams disappeared in the jungle to start their night shift to push back the Tiger FDL further while armoured tanks moving parallely towards the same direction.

We stopped at the 'eco-spot' for a while to say good bye to the 55 Div. GOC. "Troops managed to kill three other LTTE cadres", announced Brig. Silva accompanied with the Deputy GOC Brig. Nissanka Ranawana and the 551 Brigade Commander Col. Mahinda Weerasoorya announced the good news. The team was in the jungles from 5.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. busy hunting. for the hit and run infiltrators.

Finally the three suicide bombers were killed at Kadeikadei. The stock -jungle fatigues, weapons, medicines and tinned foods - they brought with them, were sufficient for over two months.

While Soosai, Lawrence, Swarnam, Gopith and other Tiger leaders accusing each other for the failed attempt which killed many dozens of their cadres, the 55 division troops were preparing for their military thrust towards the safe zone to liberate thousands of civilians forcibly caged by the LTTE to delay the soldiers entering into the tiny patch of land where the ruthless Tigers now encircle.

“We hope more civilians will come to us when we reach the safe zone”, echoed Brig. Silva who was not only hopeful, but ordered the troops not to use a single bullet that would harm the fleeing civilians.

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