



ADOBE
FLASH
PLAYER.



Biggest hostage rescue in military history

By Tissa Ravindra Perera

Brave soldiers of the country turned a new leaf in the military history of the world, by becoming the first force to undertake the release of the largest number of hostages.

These brave soldiers were able to subdue the enemy almost completely, while safeguarding the civilians.

The soldiers were able to conquer the forward defence line of the enemy by the dawn of April 20, and by April 24 some 104,868 civilians escaped from the Tigers to cleared areas seeking government protection.

Several LTTE leaders, along with other rebels, gave up their fight and also came along with the civilians seeking the protection of the government. Former media spokesman of the LTTE, Daya Master, and interpreter George were among those who crossed over.

In addition, there were about 15 others who were considered as Lieutenant Colonels within the outfit. Within two days, 700 hardcore senior members had also crossed over. Meanwhile, four doctors of the LTTE medical wing, with more than 10 years of experience within the outfit, also escaped to a government held area.

All these took place at a crucial period, when various countries, including the USA, were pressurising the Government for a pause in the ongoing operations and enter into another deceptive ceasefire. Today, the country is able to enjoy these victories because President Mahinda Rajapaksa as Commander in Chief and Gotabhaya Rajapaksa Defence Secretary extended their fullest support to the Army Commander to carry out the ongoing humanitarian operation, till they get the last Tiger, without giving into the international pressure.

Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka after finalising plans to rescue the civilian hostages, called 58 Division under Brig. Shavendra Silva, Special Forces Regiment under Col. Athula Koddipili and Commando Regiment under Col. Ralph Nugera, to carryout the final battle.

Wanni Commander Maj. Gen. Jagath Jayasuriya coordinated the entire operation. 58-1 Brigade under Col. Deshapriya Goonewardana had 9 Gemunu Watch (GW) under Lt. Col. Lal Chandrasiri, 10 & 11 SLLI under Lt. Col. Samantha Wickramasena and Lt. Col. Kithsiri Ekanayaka respectively, 8 Gajaba Regiment under Lt. Col. Vajira Welagedera and 7 Sinha Regiment under Lt. Col. Kithsiri Layanage were to go forward with the 1st Special Forces Battalion under Maj. Mahinda Ranasinghe and 2nd Commando Regiment (CR) under Maj. Shyamal Silva, as planned.

The Tigers had erected an earth bund in the lagoon area covering a 12-km stretch of the 'No Fire Zone' (NFZ), to keep the Army from entering it. They had also erected bunkers equipped with heavy artillery every 50 meters, to prevent security forces (SF) from crossing the lagoon. However, by that time 58 Division had deployed forces 100 meters near the lagoon.

Surveillance and simulations

Small squads from 2 CR, Special Forces and SLLI were deployed to carry out initial surveillance in Puttumatalan and Ampalavanpokkanai areas to liberate the NFZ. The overall objective was to penetrate the LTTE's defence line and rescue the civilians held captive.

Initial observation was carried out on the area where large numbers of civilians were gathered in the NFZ. Soldiers stationed neck-high in the lagoon, identified enemy targets in the NFZ.

It was decided to send the CR into the Puthumathalan area, where highest number of civilians was gathered in the NFZ, since they had special training in rescuing hostages.

Meanwhile, it was planned to enter the Special Forces from the Ampalavanpokkanai area and the GW from an area in between. After the initial surveillance, a sketch of the earth bund was created and practised upon, prior to the attack.

It was confirmed that strong security points along the earth bund in addition to the bunkers, had been set up every 50 metres.

L/Corporal Ramanayaka of the 2 CR, along with his four-man team, was neck-high in the lagoon doing round-the-clock surveillance to spy on Tiger movements. Meanwhile, other troops made good use of the earth bunds captured in the Pudukudiyirippu area, to practise upon.

The 9 GW to the right of 2 CR and 11 SLLI to the right of GW and the Special Forces from the side of



Ampalavanpokkanai, were preparing to advance.

Troops were ready to move forward at the auspicious time of 11.00 p.m., as planned. However, in order to address the needs of a battlefield, small teams were positioned in advance at identified points close to the earth bund. The order to move came at 2 a.m.

Troops of the Special Forces also made surveillance while being neck-high in the lagoon, in the Ampalavanpokkanai area. In addition to 1 Special Force troops, the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) of 3 Special Force was also deployed in surveillance.

There were instances when small teams of soldiers deployed near the earth bund to spy on terrorist movements, climbed onto the bund, undetected by the LTTE.

Small teams of the Special Force managed to capture the bund amidst heavy attacks from the enemy. Although the Tigers used heavy weaponry and artillery, the SF were tactful when retaliating against the enemy, since their main objective was to prevent civilian casualties, in their pursuit to enter this area. They faced the biggest Tiger resistance here in this battle.

Alpha Company under Capt. Ajith Gamage, Foxtrot Company under Capt. Subasinghe and Juliet Company under Capt. Premachandra, advanced 800 metres of their assigned area, destroying all bunkers set up by the rebels.

There were about five strong points at Pokkanai junction. All of them were attacked and the bund captured by 2.15 a.m. on April 20. The battle lasted about four hours.

No sooner the bund was taken, the civilians started their trek. It was similar to opening the sluice gates of a lake. Two suicide LTTE cadres who came along with the civilians, blew themselves up, in a bid to stop the civilians, killing 17 of them.

Mavil Aru hero's supreme sacrifice at the NFZ

The Tigers fired continuously at the civilians fleeing the NFZ. Capt. Ajith Gamage who went forward to rescue civilians, after capturing the bund, was gunned down by a rebel sniper. This hero, Major (posthumously) Ajith Gamage, himself one of the best snipers of the Army, became the first officer to lay down his life in the hostage release.

Capt. Ajith Gamage was involved in the opening of the sluice gates at Mavil Aru. He gave leadership in getting them opened in the same way he gave leadership to the largest ever hostage release operation in history.

For his efforts at Mavil Aru, he was awarded the Weera Wickrama medallion. He was then acting OIC of Alpha Company. In this battle also he continued fighting without informing his superiors of his injuries from artillery shrapnel earlier.

He was again awarded the Weera Wickrama Vibushana Medal for bravery as CO of Alpha Company during the Sampur operation, where he crossed a dangerous waterway. In the battle for Vakarai, he crossed Madurankenikullam to take 150 Tiger lives, which won the battle and won him the Weera Wickrama Vibushana again.

Bravery in battle and exemplary leadership inspired others in battle to come forward and get him out of difficulty. This move took the lives of four other brave soldiers of the Special Forces.

Delta Company of 2 CR under Capt. Chaminda Samarasinghe, stood 800 metres north of Puttumatalan, while Alpha Company under Capt. Sanjeeva Navaratne was parallel to the Puttumatalan-Iranapalai route and the open area below it, and 9 GW joined them below that.

Meanwhile, 9 GW had been in surveillance of Tiger activity and the bund for five days, while sitting neck deep in the lagoon.

Sixteen eight-man groups were deployed by GW for this operation. Troops were lined up along the lagoon to advance with the aid of ropes, to attend to the injured and to carry them on their shoulders across the lagoon, when necessary.

Deliverance

Delta Company under Capt. Sampath Illangakoon, Charley Company under 2nd Lt. Rasika Jayantha, Bravo Company under Capt. Sanjaya Ranasinghe and Alpha Company under 2nd Lt. Wasala were deployed to 9 GW.

The 16 squads under this group attacked the Tiger defence line simultaneously and gained control of all the bunkers following a fierce battle.

The brave Officer, 2nd Lt. W.D. Jayathilake sacrificed his life in this battle while carrying out an ambush on a Tiger bunker. Five days earlier, he had climbed the Tiger bund on the very first day of a surveillance operation, telling his superior officer that, "It was no big task to get on top of the bund."

Another five soldiers sacrificed their lives along with Lt. Jayathilake, while 26 were injured. Meanwhile, 11 SLLI, in their attempt to gain entry into the NFZ from Pokkanai, had built a temporary bridge with Padda boats. They had also built separate six-foot Padda boats to operate with the aid of ropes, using heated three-inch PVC pipes with glue inside to make them waterproof. These were used to transport goods to the battle area and bring injured soldiers from there. Those were even used to take arms to the battle area across the lagoon, without getting them wet.

This Battalion lost three of its brave soldiers in the battle alongside 1 Special Force to gain the Tiger bund.

As practised, 8 GR rushed troops to battle areas, while Alpha and Delta Companies of 2 CR carried out operations to capture the bund.

L/Cpl. Gunasekera during surveillance of the Tigers security ring, went inside the NFZ disguised as a Tamil civilian, and the information he thus obtained helped immensely in the final push to take the bund. He had information that the civilians would escape to Government controlled areas, if the bund was penetrated.

No sooner the bund was taken, 8 GR started announcing over loudspeakers that civilians could move towards the SF, since they had penetrated the earth bund. The civilians were directed to an area 100 metres over the Pudumatalan route, by troops waiting where the lagoon was shallow, to help those crossing.

When SF were advancing after overrunning Tiger bunkers, LTTE cadres were seen abandoning their weapons and joining those civilians marching into government held areas. In the first 24-hours 46,748 civilians came to 58 Division, 10,800 to 55 Division and 656 to 53 Division. Another 2,700 came to the Navy seeking their protection.

The President, after watching UAV relays of the exodus, and rebel attempts to stop civilians by blocking them with vehicles and shooting them, later showed these video tapes to foreign diplomats in the country. This helped largely to silence those foreign elements who raised their voices in support of the LTTE.

One last push

With civilians flowing into government held areas, operations were launched to capture the expanse of area from the earth bund to the coast.

Alpha Company of 2 CR, 7 SR, 9 GW, 1 Special Force and 11 SLLI who went targeting the Pudumathalan junction, were able to gain control of the area up to the coastal belt.

2 CR's Golf Company under Maj. Jaliya Dehideniya, were able to destroy a vehicle killing two Tiger leaders Kalendra and Vijith and another vehicle that came to blast the FDL of the Army.

Meanwhile, 9 GW destroyed a motorbike on a suicide mission from Pudumathalan North. On their way to the seashore, the Commandos captured a 12.7 weapon, a machine gun and an RPG. The NFZ got split in two, when the SLLI led by Commandos and Special forces enforced a defence line there.

Another memorable event that took place was 58 Division's advance from Mannar along the West coast to Pooneryn and from thereon to the East coast by moving through the interior. This, indeed, was a notable achievement by 58 Division.

The 58 Division planned to join up with 55 Division, by advancing towards North of Pudumathalan. The 2 CRs' Alpha and Bravo Companies, along with 7 SR started advancing at 4.00 a.m. on April 22. On their way, they attacked a main Sea Tiger camp and found vehicles and boats. While advancing, troops were able to confirm that terrorists had escaped by boat to the NFZ in the Vellamullawaikal area. Troops carried out Multi Barrel attacks on escaping rebels.

Meanwhile, 55 Division under Brig. Prasanna de Silva advanced and on the way, its 5 CR and 2 CR of 58 Division, came together around 8.30 a.m. on April 22.

Col. Rohan Palayangoda commanding 5 GW under 53 Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Kamal Guneratna and soldiers of 2 Special Forces commanded by Maj. Vipula Ihalage, after the battle, advanced from the lagoon towards the bund at Valayarmadam.

Heading for VP

Meanwhile, troops of the Air Mobile Brigade of 53 Division and 17 GW under Lt. Col. Kitsiri Kottewatte, belonging to Task Force VIII led by Col. G.V. Ravipriya, along with the troops of 4 Vijayaba Regiment (VR), were advancing along the A-35 route towards Wellamullawaikal, where LTTE leaders were tipped to be staying.

Tearing down the Tiger security rings, troops under Col. Lalantha Gamage commanding 681 Brigade too, were advancing, when 2nd Lt. A.D. Karunaratne of 4 VR and Lt. G.E. Guruge of 10 Artillery Regiment were killed by rebel fire from the NFZ.

The LTTE was making it difficult for the SF to advance to where the Tiger leaders were, by continuously attacking advancing troops with heavy weapons, including artillery.

Even Daya Master disclosed that Tiger leader Prabhakaran is inside the NFZ, in an area between Wellamullawaikal and the edge of Mulaitivu. This area has been surrounded from the South by 59 Division. Lt. Col. Subashana Welikala commander of 682 and his troops have laid a complete security ring across the lagoon from the West of Nanthikadal lagoon. 53 and 58 Divisions and troops of Special Force and Commando are coming down from Valayarmadam, and the destiny of the Tiger supremo will soon become evident.

