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## 'To be or not to be' week for Itte

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By Tissa Ravindra Perera

The battle to take last Tiger fortress at Vellamullivaikkal, where Prabhakaran and his remaining key associates are hiding, reached a decisive stage on Friday May 8. By Friday, 58 and 53 Divisions advancing on either side of the Mullaitivu-Paranthan (A35) road breached all Tiger bunds that were found on the way.

The final bund was taken by troops of the 58 Division under the command of Brig. Shavendra Silva. The bund 8 ft high and 1km long was situated below Karayamullivaikkal. It had been littered with anti-personnel mines and booby traps. To breach the bund, Lt. Col. Kamal Pinnawela commanding the Sixth Gemunu Watch (GW) advanced on the A35, advancing on the left of them was Seventh Sinha Regiment (SR) commanded by Lt. Col. Kithsiri Liyanage and further to the left the Ninth Vijayaba Regiment (VR) led by Lt. Col. Sisira Herath joined in. The leadership to these regiments was given by 58-1 Brigade (Bde) under Col. Deshapriya Gunewardena and 58-2 Bde under Lt. Col. Sanjaya Wanigasingha.

The bund extended one kilometre from the coast up to the A35. A dozer and a contingent of Tiger cadres giving security to it were taken out by the troops of Sixth GW while they were involved in putting up a further bund from there to Nandikadal Lagoon, to obstruct the advancing forces. A team led by Cpl. Sampath Kumarage took out the enemy contingent and later recovered the bodies of four Tiger cadres along with their arms and ammunition.

The operation to take the Tiger bund began on the night of Wednesday May 6. Within a couple of hours after going through mines and booby traps the troops advanced to capture several parts of the bund.

The troops of Sixth GW and Seventh SR were able to capture 600 metres of the bund. The Ninth Vijayaba Regiment (VR) could not mount their sector of the bund due to intense Tiger fire directed at them.

Although the Sixth GW troops were heavily attacked by four waves of Tigers they managed to overcome the 40 odd Tigers involved in the assault.

Bravo Company led by Capt. T.N. Peiris, Delta Company under Capt. T. Santhage and Charley Company under Lt. Vasantha Gunasekara too took part in the battle, and small teams led by Cpls. D.M. Keppetipola, Sampath Kumara, Lalith Nilantha, W. Samantha, D.A. Ratnayaka and P.A. Chandralal were deployed to beat back the Tiger assaults.

### Hours of heavy fighting

After hours of heavy fighting Tigers who took part in the assault were seen beating a hasty retreat as picked up by film footage from Air Force UAVs, monitoring the battlefield.

The service rendered through out the battle by the UAVs and Beach craft is much appreciated by ground Commanders. In addition, Bell 212 and MI 17 helicopters too are doing a yeoman service in evacuating wounded soldiers from the battlefield in coordination with the Army Medical Corps.

The balance stretch of about 600m of the bund was taken by the Seventh SR and Ninth VR commencing operations on May 7 night and completing the task by dawn of the following day. Twenty bodies of Tiger cadres killed in the battle, along with their arms were also found.

While the bund was being taken, the Sixth GW giving flank support to the two regiments involved in the operation had themselves advanced 300m from the bund.

The Infantry Regiments belonging to the 53 Division under Maj. Gen. Kamal Guneratne advanced parallel to 58 Division on the background of the A35 and Nandikadal lagoon. Air Mobile Brigade, under the command of Lt. Col. Thilak Hangilipola was mobilised by 53 Division for this task.

After the 58 Division advancing from Putumattalan direction and 53 Division met on A35 on May 01, the two advanced on the left and right sides of the A35.

The Tenth Gajaba Regiment (GR) under Maj. Janaka Udowita and 17 GW commanded by Lt. Col. Keerthi Kotiwatte of the 58 and 53 Divisions linked up at the same time as troops of Fifth Vijeyaba Regiment commanded by Lt. Col. Kalpa Sanjeeva joined them after coming in from two different routes. Two eight-man teams of the Delta Company of the Fifth VR under Capt. Ranjith Weerakkody met after coming over the Aqueduct and on the Putumattalan road.

The Fifth VR that advanced with the 53 Division towards Kerriyamullivaikkal managed to breach two Tiger bunds by May 4 between Nandikadal lagoon and A35 route.

### **Charley Company**

Charley Company under Maj. Buddhika Athukorala, Bravo Company under Capt. Suminda Gunasingha took part in the battle. They were given support fire by the Alpha Company under Maj. Roshan Silva. In the battle for the second bund encountered by 53 Division on May 3, troops that advanced around 7.30pm captured the bund by 9.30pm. The Tigers launched eight waves of attacks to dislodge them till 5:00am without any success.

Meanwhile, dossiers compiled by the Tiger intelligence on VIP's, were found in a captured bunker. Detailed reports, photographs, addresses and telephone numbers of ministers and other VIPs, and even their private secretaries were found. In addition newspaper reports and letters written in support of Tigers written by those like Dr. Wickramabahu Karunaratne too were found. After the capture of bunds the sixth SR under Maj. Panduka Perera was tasked to advance with 53 Division. By May 8 Friday troops of Sixth Gajaba Regiment under Lt. Col. Mohan Ratnayaka advanced from 53 Division. This regiment amidst heavy fighting advanced one kilometre or more, parallel to 58 Division.

Advancing during day time was difficult for both Divisions. The government decision to not use Multi barrel rocket launchers, heavy artillery or air strikes due to the presence of civilians was to LTTE advantage. In this open terrain with hardly any tree cover the advancing troops became easy picking for Tiger snipers. In addition the heat of the sun directly hitting them forced them to curtail all their operations to night time.

Although the armed forces were not allowed to use heavy arms, the Tigers had no such restrictions and they used heavy artillery, mortars, tanks, foot peddled anti-aircraft guns and other heavy arms at their disposal to hit at troop positions.

Amidst such disadvantages the troops of the two Divisions advanced toward Vellamullivaikkal. By May 08 the 58 Division had advanced 12 kilometres on the NFZ across Putumattalan, passed Ampalavanpokkanai, and Kariyalamullivaikkal.

Out of the entire remaining six square kilometres area of the NFZ under the LTTE the two Divisions had only another four kilometres to cover. They had come within a distance of catching a glimpse of the Telecom Tower at Mullaitivu.

### **Battle front intensified**

The battle front was intensified with the crossing of Nandikadal lagoon mouth from Mullaitivu by the 55 Division Commander Maj. Gen. Prasanna de Silva, who has now been given temporary command of the 59 Division advancing from Mullaitivu side. Having captured the Tiger fortress Mullaitivu it was a difficult task for the 59 Division to cross the Nandikadal lagoon mouth. The point where the 500m wide lagoon mouth is connected to the A35 by a causeway had been blasted by Tigers at two points. The shore had been mined and a bund erected across the frontlines of armed forces. The lagoon mouth being about 20 feet deep made crossing a difficult task. Against all odds some strategic moves made it possible to breach the bund by May 8, the Sixth Light Infantry and 11 GW too joined the battle.

Tigers used a recoilless weapon fitted to the centre of the abandoned Farah-3 ship in the Mullaitivu Sea and the 122 mm artillery that was brought to the front of their bund.

"All bunds of the Tigers have been over run by our brave forces. According to aerial photographs there are no more bunds to be seen unless they erect new ones in the 4km area within the next few days." a senior officer in the frontlines said.

Capturing of these Tiger forward lines will be a crucial issue in the coming week. If the hostages are released in the next few days it will be an easier task for the security forces to surround the underground bunker line where Prabhakaran and other Tiger leaders are hiding.

The Tigers too will be planning a crucial move in the coming week. With Indian election entering its key round covering Tamil Nadu on May 16 Tigers might use it as an appropriate time to coax the state to demand "stop military activity of Sri Lankan Government in the North if you seek our support."

### **Possible to get hostages released**

It will be possible for the security forces to get the hostages released in the next few days. The Army Commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka is in touch with the situation on an hourly basis and is giving good leadership to the final operation.

The American government along with some European governments was demanding that no harm should befall the civilians in the North. Yet in one US air strike in Afghanistan this week using their precision weaponry had killed more than 100 innocent women and children forcing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to make an apology and wash off her hands.

It is obvious that with the limited resources available and considering intelligence reports from the ground on civilians, our pilots have been much more successful and may be able give the Americans a lesson on air operations. When the Tiger training camp at Sencholai was attacked it was the Americans who immediately issued a statement against it but later realized the truth.

While Tiger bastions were falling all round like nine pins, a group of its suicide bombers, who were the final lot, had been put out of action at Halmillewa, in Vavuniya. Their intention had been to carry out a suicide attack on a top military commander or a military convoy carrying soldiers. Acting on intelligence, the group was cornered by two eight-man teams of the Third Special Forces on May 5.

When the troops closed in on them the two Tiger cadres who were already wearing suicide kits blew themselves up while the other two were shot dead by the Special Forces. Two veterans of the Army's Deep Penetration Units, both sergeants operating under Third Special Forces sacrificed their lives, while another veteran was wounded in the operation. The two Sergeants who gave their lives were J.J.C. Wijesuriya of Dehimaduwa, Mawanella and M.W. Ratnayaka of Appeladeniya, Giriulla. The sergeants who paid with their lives, Wijesuriya and Ratnayaka were involved in Jayasikuru, Kinihira, Agnikeelaya 1 and 2, Mavilaru, Sampur and Vakara and final Wannu surge and had performed daring operations in the past.

Sgt. Wijesuriya joined the army in 1996 and the Special Forces in 1997. Due to his dedication he was designated to receive the Ranawickrama Medal twice during Wannu operations and was also entitled to Ranasoora. Before that he had been awarded the Poornaboomi, North-East Medal for battle and the 50th Army anniversary award.

#### **Grit shown**

Sgt. Ratnayaka joined the Army in 1997 and the Special Forces in 1998. He was designated to be awarded the Ranawickrama for grit shown in the Wannu battle. In addition, he has been awarded the Pooranaboomi, North-East Medal and the Army 50th anniversary award.

From the day and the time they joined Special Forces they were involved in small team operations taking out targets deep inside Tiger held territory. Sergeant Ratnayaka had worked under late legendary Lt. Col. Lalith Jayasingha who sacrificed his life trying the impossible task of getting a target on Prabhakaran's birthday November 26, 2007 deep inside Tiger territory. Once during one birthday of Prabhakaran this tiny group blew up 13 bombs deep inside Tiger lines, forcing the LTTE to clamp a curfew to search for the mystery group.

Cpl. Amila Udesh of Elpitiya, who was involved in the operation to breach the Tiger defence bund at Putumattalan to release those held hostage and then was killed on April 23 while doing recce deep inside Tiger held NFZ for intended forward operations too was one of those brave soldiers of Third Special Forces. He too received Ranawickrama Medal, North-Eastern Battle Medal and Poornaboomi medal.

Cpl. Udesh along with Sgts. Ratnayaka and Wijesuriya were part of the SF that killed more than 600 Tiger cadres, including many leaders like Theepan and Vidusha in one spot at Pudukudyirippu last month. It is our duty not only remember such brave soldiers but make all efforts to look after the members of their families.

Meanwhile, the 'Belly clearing team,' a concept of the Army Commander started with the idea of deploying ten-man surveillance teams, in areas recaptured from Tigers to prevent infiltrators staging daring attacks. These teams have made this concept successful by going over every inch of these areas. They have been successful not only digging out hidden arms caches but also flushing out Tiger infiltrators preparing attacks.

These operations were carried out by ten-man teams formed under Col. Senarath Bandara of the 57 Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias. While these final operations were going on the 58 Division came across a device which looked as a subterranean passage or a dry dock made of thick steel. It was built with rails and thick metal sheets and was 360 ft in length and 25ft wide. It had been built on rail tracks and may have been intended as an underground passage to the sea from an interior lagoon or can for a small submersible.

It had 20' by 25' cabins and the steel sheets used were three inches thick. Close by were two large engines and trailer with wheels.

In addition to that device by the shore, a 100ft long 50 ft wide 30 ft deep swimming pool was found. The floor had been made out of concrete and it was filled with sea water. It might be a sort of dry dock to repair their vessels. While these unsolved mysteries took place another was taking place in the deep seas. A mysterious boat had been spotted in the deep seas and the Air-force jets had pounded it. It had been first noticed as a capsized boat, according to security reports.

Meanwhile, Military Secretary Brig. G. S. Padumadasa has made some key changes in the army high command.

#### **Deputy Chief of Staff**

Quarter Master General Maj. Gen. Upul Perera has been made the Deputy Chief of Staff. This position was last held by late Maj. Gen. Parami Kulatunga, who was killed by a Tiger suicide bomber. The position had remained vacant for three years, since his demise.

The former Army Spokesperson and the present Overall Operations Commander, Anuradhapura Maj. Gen. Sanath Karunaratna has been attached to Army Headquarters pending his retirement on May 23 on reaching 55 years of age. Replacing him as OOC, Anuradhapura will be Maj Gen. Nandana Udawatta, who successfully led the 59 Division from Weli-oya to Mullaitivu. Brig. Chagee Gallage has been appointed the Commander of 59 Division. Brig. A.L.R. Wijetunga has taken over as the Quarter Master General.



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