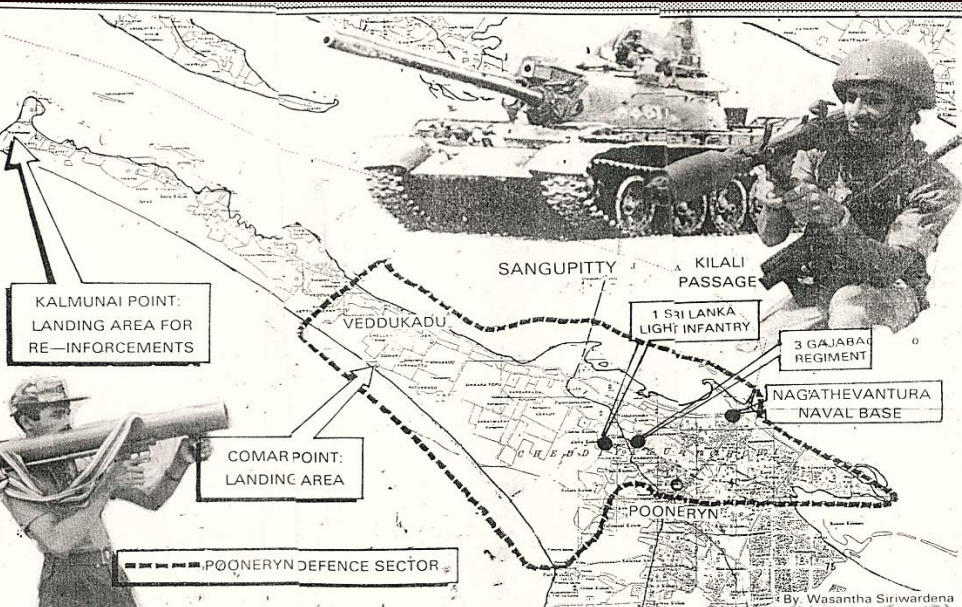


Pooneryn: the good, the bad, and the ugly. (1993, November 21) The Sunday times.

Pooneryn: the good, the bad, and the ugly



A grim picture emerges from the battlefield

By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

As a grateful nation mourns the deaths of her patriotic sons who paid the supreme sacrifice in the Pooneryn disaster, there was euphoria in the LTTE held Jaffna peninsula.

Amidst the "Veera Vanakkam" (achievement of martyrdom) ceremonies, Tiger leader, Velupillia Prabhakaran, was decorating some of his top cadres for "bravery" in successfully executing "Operation Thavala" or Frog in Tamil. That was the code name given by Prabhakaran to the Tiger offensive in the Pooneryn sector beginning around 1.30 am, on November 11.

Its mission was to ensure "safe" boat movements across the Jaffna lagoon, now better known as the Kilali passage, both for Tiger cadres and civilians alike.

For some months now, the focal point of Tiger propaganda in the peninsula has been a promise by Prabhakaran to "liberate" the Pooneryn sector from the hands of the security forces and thus ensure unhindered access between the peninsula and the mainland. The Tigers also wanted to establish greater domination of the Jaffna lagoon.

The importance of the Kilali passage that prompted the Army into "Operation Yal Devi". Had the Army exploited their success of advancing to Kilali at great sacrifice of soldiers and remained there, it would have denied to the LTTE this important passage and the crucial operational, logistic and communication linkage between the peninsula and the mainland.

This passage was the only free linkage the LTTE had and was of singular value to the Wanni peninsula axis which is critical to the northern centre, LTTE thinking. Since the Army did not occupy Kilali, the LTTE was able to retain this strategic plum and use it as one of its major launch pads for "Operation Thavala".

In hindsight, therefore, had the Army kept possession of Kilali and prevented the LTTE use of the Jaffna lagoon, the attack on Pooneryn could perhaps well have been pre-empted by denying the LTTE the advantage of a well-pronged north-south attack on the Army.

From last week, as the security forces who re-occupied the Pooneryn sector were busy consolidating the defences and re-establishing facilities, boat movements were going on through the Kilali passage. There have of course been a few air attacks on Tiger boats by the Sri Lanka Air Force aircraft. But they had their limitations in the absence of Naval and ground support.

To execute "Operation Thavala" Prabhakaran put together a mix of his various cadres. The bulk of them were drawn from the districts of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Backing them were the specialised units, the Charles Anthony "Brigade", Black Sea Tigers (a new "Commando" unit) to supplement the Sea Tigers for sea and lagoon combat, Black Tigers and Women's units. There were some 2,000 of them deployed for the offensive, the first of which was a large number took part since the conventional assault on the Elephant Pass camp which they held siege for 28 days in 1989.

Warnings

As I said in these columns last week, intelligence warnings of an impending attack were passed on to Army top brass by senior defence officials well in advance. Even a few hours before the attack began, there were reports of warnings.

This had come after the main Naval base in the north (Karainagar) intercepted heavy traffic on radio communications and learnt cadres were being mustered for an attack.

The Pooneryn sector defences, some 33 square kilometres, is one single complex manned both by Navy and Army personnel. On the western end of this complex by Comar Point, the landing area through which supplies and personnel movements take place.

Adjoining that across the thin strip of land, towards the east is the Nagathevantura Naval detachment. The Navy men who were here that on that fateful night were housed in two areas - most in the detachment command area and the others, some 50 metres away, in billets near the pier from where the boats plied the Jaffna lagoon. From here, a telephone linked them to a Navy unit deployed at the Elephant Pass Camp. They kept in regular contact.

Further southeast of this complex, closer to the Pooneryn town side were the Battalion Headquarters of 1 Sri Lanka Light Infantry (SLLI), and some 100 metres away, the 3 Gajaba Regiment. Also located in this area was a Navy unit.

Besides the Navy men, personnel of the two battalions, there were also an assortment of others including those from the Armoured Corps, Artillery Regiment, Corps of Engineers, Army Signals, Army Supply Corp, Army Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and the National Guard Battalion.

But what has now sparked off a serious controversy is the presence of 297 trainees who are all dead or missing

in action. Contrary to all training norms, these men had been at the Pooneryn complex, a high intensity battle area, to learn the skills of becoming a soldier. The only reason for this was the fact that they could not desert since they will fall into enemy hands.

"This has never happened before. The untrained and unarmed men were cannon fodder," remarked an angry defence official. He said government leaders were unaware of the training of recruits on the frontline.

When "Operation Thavala" got under way, how the troops in the Pooneryn sector fought back, showed their great ability to face adversity at tremendous personal sacrifice. This was when induction of re-inforcements became difficult, when they were forced to stay on without food, medical supplies and water. They retained their morale and fought in the face of adversity and death stalking.

The Sunday Times has been able to piece together more details of the disaster at Pooneryn. The most touching human drama occurred at the Nagathevantura Naval base. Sea Tiger frogmen who came in rafts damaged one sophisticated radar and a communication tower. When they launched their attacks on the main pier, the navy men telephoned Tiger for reinforcements and kept on engaging the naval positions.

The telephone was working. Those at Nagathevantura immediately rang the Navy Unit at Elephant Pass to call for re-inforcements while others kept on firing. As the pre-dawn hours ticked by, the Navy men were under heavy pressure. Many were hit by enemy fire. Some were dead but a good number were wounded. There were fears that they may be over-run.

When there is light at the end of the barrel, one can hope for relief and derive strength. But when everything is bleak and lost, is the moment of truth when courage, training and national pride overcomes physical threats and injuries. This our troops have and what happened illustrates this amply.

The injured who lay fallen insisted that the others leave immediately after they destroy whatever equipment possible. But those who were resisting did not have the heart to do that. They wanted to go down fighting too. As some more were hit, the wounded insisted. The able men destroyed some communication equipment and telephoned Elephant Pass to report on what was happening. Now, wounded men were lying on the ground, some were being carried to the pier, others were being carried to the shore. Now the wounded were exhorting that the others should leave but insisted that each of them be given a grenade to kill themselves if they fell into enemy hands. Then came the crucial parting on Friday night. The able left leaving the wounded.

Some forty two Navy men joined in by a small group of soldiers walked through the Jaffna lagoon sometimes wading neck deep in water, to a pre-arranged point at Sina Paranthan where a Navy team picked them up. They were taken to Elephant Pass and were later flown to the main Military Base at Palaly.

The wounded men paid the supreme sacrifice as the Tiger's over-ran Nagathevantura Naval base. They destroyed the remaining radar. Before setting the fleet of boats at the pier, they blasted one of them triggering a loud explosion which set off a fire which spread to signify that the objective of their mission had been achieved. Tigers also ransacked the armoury.

The Navy men who escaped gave a detailed account of the events to Navy Commander, Vice Admiral Mohan Samarasekera, at Palaly.

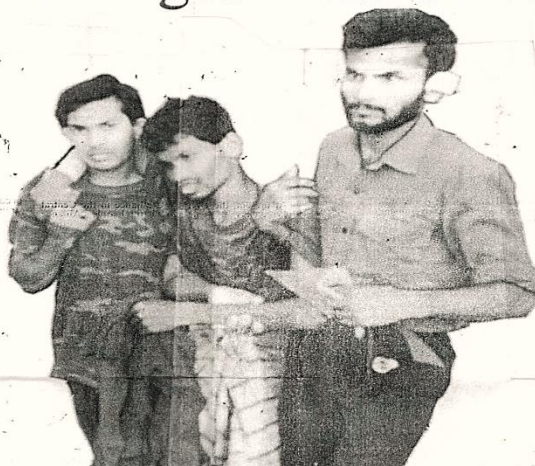
The Army positions in the Pooneryn sector were in a cluster of zinc roofed buildings located near paddy fields and palm groves. The Forward Defence Lines (FDLs) were located distantly and had no fences or barricades.

But an important aspect that has come to light is the fact that the Tigers had infiltrated the camp areas hours before the attack proper took place. Soldiers manning the complex were not aware of this till they themselves were killed, wounded or escaped.

Detailed accounts now available show how most of the soldiers were shot dead some of the invading Tigers, they collected their weapons, the bodies and moved them to a centre compound of the camp complex. This went on a few times till the battalion headquarters of the 1 Sri Lanka Light Infantry. But the soldiers could not do it any more. The Tigers who had infiltrated began attacking the soldiers. This surprise attack took a heavy toll. Some soldiers had thought the men inside were their own colleagues for they too were in fatigues.

As dawn was about to break, Tigers were facing little resistance. A while earlier Lt. Col. Ranjit Silva, Commanding Officer of 1 Sri Lanka Light Infantry had destroyed communications equipment and shifted positions with some men.

He had later re-grouped with men from the 3 Gajaba Regiment. The Commanding Officer of 3 Gajaba, Ma-



Injured soldiers who survived the Pooneryn attack

Major Hemapala who was there had been killed by enemy fire. When the others got together, Lt. Col. Silva was the senior officer there. This group consisted of officers and men who were with the Pooneryn sector. Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne later took the unprecedented step of promoting Lt. Col. Ranjit Silva to the rank of full Colonel.

When dawn broke, the Tigers had made their first catch. They had not only seized the armouries of the two battalions but two Main Battle Tanks, 15 Fifty Calibre (Five Zero) guns, 19 RPG launchers, over 800 machine guns and rifles, pistols and a vast array of other military hardware now estimated to be over Rs. 300 million. Although Tigers seized five 120mm Artillery guns, Army officials said two were later recovered. As Thursday dawned, the news of the disaster at Pooneryn spread countrywide. The Government ordered the service chiefs Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne (Army), Air Vice Marshal Terrance Gunawardena (Air Force) and Vice Admiral Mohan Samarasekera (Navy) to rush to the north. The trio flew to Palaly.

Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne was both angry and upset. He told some senior officers even if he found it hard to come to grips with the fact that more than 400 men had been killed, it was much harder to believe that the Tigers had taken two Main Battle Tanks. He said he felt ashamed of this fact since he rose in the ranks of the Armoured Corps.

Government leaders who were closely monitoring the aftermath of the Pooneryn disaster as hours ticked away on Thursday, were beginning to get increasingly concerned that no rescue efforts had gone into effect. This concern was heightened when disturbing reports trickled in that some top brass wanted to abandon any rescue effort, unbelievable but true.

Ranil's measures

Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had just returned to Colombo after representing Sri Lanka at the ceremonial induction of Maldivian President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was most concerned. He promptly took the situation and set in motion a series of measures.

He sent Defence Secretary, Hamilton Wansinghe, to Vavuniya. Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne and other top brass were advised to fly from Palaly to Vavuniya and meet the Defence Secretary.

At a top level conference, General Wansinghe delivered Premier Wickremesinghe's strong message - a rescue effort should be launched at any cost to save the trapped men in Pooneryn and to regain the area. He said the top brass should formulate a plan and enforce it immediately. General Wansinghe flew back to report to the Prime Minister. The top brass returned to Palaly and were busy formulating a major effort to induce re-inforcements some 36 hours after the attack took place.

In Colombo, as the news spread of the events in the Pooneryn sector, there were other developments. Dr. Sanarath Madduma Bandara, Director of Information, recommended to President, D.B. Wijetunga, that a censorship be imposed immediately.

If Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne advocated censorship after the Sunday Times published its first account of "Operation Yal Devi" on October 10, it took his senior officers to say a censorship was not necessary. They explained that the local media had been reporting the situation since the Department of Information remained closed in the evenings unlike the Operational Headquarters which was open round the clock. The Foreign Ministry which had to brief overseas Sri Lanka missions and foreign correspondents were unable to obtain copies.

President Wijetunga not only decided against a censorship but asked the Department of Information, the main state arm that disseminates official information, to channel reports on the ongoing separatist war.

Earlier, some of the official reports were also channelled to the media by the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence. The new move led to some confusion since the Department of Information remained closed in the evenings unlike the Operational Headquarters which was open round the clock. The Foreign Ministry which had to brief overseas Sri Lanka missions and foreign correspondents were unable to obtain copies.

Back in Palaly that Friday, plans to induce re-inforcements were being launched. Commandos were airlifted from the 6 Gajaba Watch and 6 Sri Lanka Light troops from the east. Colonel Shantha Kotigoda led men from the 6 Gajaba Watch and 6 Sri Lanka Light troops from the east. Colonel Shantha Kotigoda led men from the 6 Gajaba Watch and 6 Sri Lanka Light troops from the east.

Efforts by troops to break through on two occasions on Friday proved futile. On the first occasion there was resistance while during the second attempt, later in the day, heavily overcast skies posed problems. But by Saturday, troops made two successful landings by sea and began fighting their way through.

There was jubilation as two groups of trapped soldiers made contact with the re-inforcements. It was not till

late afternoon on Sunday did the men relieve Col. Ranjit Silva's besieged group. By then the rescue mission was accomplished. The re-inforcements also collected the wounded and despatched them for medical attention. Next came the task of collecting the dead bodies.

Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne monitored the induction of re-inforcements from the Operations Room of the Sri Lanka Air Force at Palaly, together with his senior officials.

At the Army Commander's Secretariat in Colombo where a separate section is tasked with handling the media, late Saturday night preparations were under way to fly a team to write an account of the rescue and re-capture of the Pooneryn sector. Captain Thilak Senanayake, a one time Dinamina journalist experienced in covering the separatist war, was telephoning a selected group around 1.30am and asking them to turn up at the Katlamana Airport later that morning. They were advised to come prepared for a three day stay at Palaly with possible visits to the re-occupied Pooneryn sector.

The selected team of media personnel flew to Palaly and were there when others, who learnt they had been left out (including foreign correspondents) protested to the Ministry of Defence. Defence Secretary, Hamilton Wansinghe who was by then at a conference at Vavuniya with security officials took up the issue with Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne. He pointed out that all media matters were being handled by the Presidential Press Secretariat and said media visits too should be left in their hands. He ordered that the media team be sent back immediately. They were flown to Colombo the same day.

Counterpoint

In the team of media personnel was Varuna Kumari, Editor of the independent news monthly "Counterpoint" which in its latest issue had given a lengthy account of the debacle of "Operation Yal Devi". Last two days before the Pooneryn disaster, Mr. Karunatilake was at the Army Commander's office. Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne and other high ranking officials whom he summoned spent time telling him the merits of "Operation Yal Devi".

The Pooneryn disaster also led to moves for a point Government Opposition spokesman, the socialist leader, Mohamed to sound him out on the Pooneryn disaster. Mr. Karunatilake was at the Army Commander's office. Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne and other high ranking officials whom he summoned spent time telling him the merits of "Operation Yal Devi".

Importantly the LTTE offensive in the Pooneryn sector comes in the backdrop of the Government's political pacification programmes and impending local elections in the eastern province. Tiger activity in the eastern province has been low profile. Yet no doubt they retain an ability to apply pressure in the east when required.

But it is doubtful the LTTE is able to concentrate adequate forces in the Eastern Province to be a formidable threat. The situation in the northern province, as seen, is totally different.

It is apparent that the LTTE reserves its cadres for flexible operations in the heartland of Eelam, the northern province. To retain this initiative, the ability to concentrate and disperse is essential. For this, they must have the freedom of movement and communication. Hence the importance of the Jaffna lagoon.

In the immediate situation, it can be predicted that the LTTE will at any cost want to retain their initiative of movement and communication between the Jaffna and the peninsula. This includes the stretch of the Wanni heartland between Mannar and Mullaitivu.

It appears as if it will concentrate its effort to an immediate strategy of domination in the northern province while retaining an ability to strike at selected pressure points in the eastern province to retain a tactical advantage. The extension of this strategy to Colombo or any other centre of political importance to the "south" cannot be excluded.

In view of the success the LTTE has achieved over the security forces in the Pooneryn sector, the threat of similar attacks by the LTTE continues. For now, it has wrested the initiative from the security forces which in the northern province and would want to maintain a credible capability in the northern province which fact alone would be disruptive to the security forces which reinforce. This will curb the security forces flexibility to reinforce the eastern province to meet increased security requirements necessitated by the forthcoming local elections and the political strategy of pacification.