

APPRECIATION

Late Lieutenant General Parami Kulatunge RSP USP

He believed decency and humanity mattered especially in war

Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, Lt. Gen. PSB (Parami) Kulatunge along with his driver Sgt. Gomez and body guard Corporal Buddhika paid the supreme sacrifice to their motherland on June 26, 2006 at Pannipitiya. They were killed by a LTTE suicide bomber.

When the LTTE killed Parami, they killed a man who worked positively to help bridge the divide between the majority community and the minorities. It was among the Tamils he did best. He counted many Tamil friends while in school and in Jaffna and Vavuniya during his tours of duty. The insane LTTE murdered an exceptional officer and gentleman who bore no malice and harboured no prejudice. While he carried out his duties fearlessly, he held fast to his beliefs that decency and humanity should prevail especially during war. His death is a great loss both to the country and the Army he served with pride, distinction and dedication. It will certainly be one more murder that Prabakaran will most certainly have to answer to all the people of this land at the correct time.

Lt. Gen. Kulatunge was the much loved youngest child of Lionel Kulatunge, a former MMC, and Leela (nee Talwatte) and beloved brother of Samantha, Indu and Lumbini. He was born at Lewella in Kandy on October 9, 1951. He had all the qualities of those indomitable 'hill-men' whose courage protected the Kandyan kingdom from the ravages of colonial incursions over 300 years. He also represented the gentle and well mannered Kandyan way of life which has an abiding respect for elders and the traditions of the Sinhalese which they guard unobtrusively but with pride.

Parami was a typical product of Trinity College, Kandy. Joining the Army in 1971 he received his initial training at the Officer Cadet School at Diyatalawa, precursor to the SL Military Academy. He was commissioned to the Gemunu Watch, (King Dutugemunu's Own) in 1972. He first served as a platoon commander in B Company under Major Anandasunderam when Lt. Col. A.W. Thambirajah (later Brigadier) was in command. He also attended many courses in India mainly. The high point of his training was in the US Army War College.

Parami was a devout Buddhist. He tried, as all Buddhist soldiers must, to reconcile his duties in the Army with the Buddhist precept that prohibits taking life. It was especially difficult to do so when fighting a terrorist organization that knows no limitations to brutality when it was one's duty to also protect the lives of one's countrymen. Instead, to the last, he with touching innocence and very strong faith believed that a person who bore no ill will nor harmed another human being should fear nothing.

Parami lived without ostentation, loved children, and always had time to interact with his soldiers, officer colleagues and friends. He was well known to the highest in the land almost from the time he started his career, but it was not of his own seeking.

Lt. Gen. Kulatunge was an amiable giant of a man standing well over 6 foot with broad shoulders, weighing many pounds more than recommended. He was also magnanimous, generous and straight forward and honest. He rarely if ever lost his temper or spoke in anger. In his junior service when chastised he would simply keep quiet rather than seek to get away with an explanation. He had an enviable record of service showing excellent

qualities of leadership both in the field and in the staff. He “fought in many a fray, fought and won,” including the gallant and epic relief of Elephant Pass in 1990 when he commanded the 6th Battalion. As 52 Division Commander in the battle for Jaffna following the reverses at Elephant Pass in 1998, he turned back the marauding LTTE at Varaani. They never came back again. In between he commanded 22 Brigades and later 11 Division. He was also at different times Security Forces Commander of Jaffna and recently of Vavuniya. He held staff appointments with distinction from the rank of Captain to Major General.

Although we were from the same regiment and played rugby together, we first worked as a team only, when I was appointed Officer Commanding (OC) Troops in Jaffna in 1980. He was a captain and the G3 staff officer and had been there the previous year when the situation was very tense there. Parami met me at Jaffna railway station around 5.30 a.m. and took me straight to Pallaly where HQ Task Force 1, our superior HQ commanded by then Colonel (later Major General), Gratien Silva was also located. The slightly senior staff officers in Task Force One were rotated during the year and included some of the best young officers at that time such as Majors Udena Gunawardene, Harin Malwatte, Mangala Ratnayake, Abdul Zaheer and Neil Dias (Later Maj. Gen. and Army Chief of Staff). They held Parami in great affection and humoured his methods of getting things done. He was a veteran of Jaffna!

Parami though quite young at the time had gained a lot of experience working with many future Army Commanders. What was very important was that he had an excellent rapport with important officials, civil and religious dignitaries and many members of the public in Jaffna. The Task Force had also started teaching spoken Tamil to all troops. Parami set an example by attending all the classes. I’m sure it stood him in good stead later on. It was to be the last year that there was no terrorist violence in Jaffna.

Whether it was operational training to hearts and minds efforts, Parami ensured all arrangements were done on time and effectively. The PR efforts certainly brought us many friends. The Pallaly officers’ mess was always full of delightful Jaffna folk on many occasions. We had blood donation campaigns in the Jaffna General Hospital. The first to donate blood was the priest in charge of the Kankasanthurai (KKS) Temple, Rev. Mahinda at his own request. The KKS temple was never attacked by the militants ever, as the priest was the saviour of any Tamil who thought he was in danger. The lady doctor in charge of the blood bank finding out probably from Parami that the OC Troops were present took me to task for not sending B positive donors that were on her list at a time when there was an urgent demand for blood. Parami very gently told her that the soldiers in Jaffna were transferred regularly every 6 months. He had personally checked our list before he sent what the Army calls a nil return. That intrepid little lady was not over-awed either by the OC Troops or their engagingly handsome 6 foot staff officer. That is the Jaffna I knew, where you gave way to the cyclists, often school girls riding abreast. We respected their tradition built over 50 years.

Another occasion was when a donation was made to the Illaveli Girls Orphanage with the collections received from the always generous troops serving in Jaffna but organized by the staff officers with Parami. At the orphanage we were entertained by the orphans to a programme of singing and oriental dancing after which one very pretty little girl made a speech in English saying that she never thought that the Army would help them as they believed we had “iron hearts”. They had instead been pleasantly surprised more-so

because the Mother Superior had told them how generous our contribution was. Everyone clapped and we all stood up to go. Parami without any warning announced that I would speak. I had no time to think. I mumbled that we were delighted to help and were overwhelmed by the reception we were given. I then blurted, not without some trepidation as we were in a convent, that never before in my life had I seen such beautiful little girls. This was translated into Tamil by the Mother Superior and even though they were very small girls, they nearly brought the house down. That was the only time Parami had abandoned me!

We went on detachment visits which included Madagal, Vellvatithurai, Elephant Pass, Mullativu and Vavuniya and had a great time testing our battle readiness called Fitness for Role (FFR) in the Army. Parami, I believe, thought that the OC had a pathological belief in being ready for war. Sadly it was he and most of the others, then in Jaffna who had to face the music when things heated up as I had retired from the army by that time. Nevertheless, he and Captains Malik Deen and later Hiran Halangoda also prepared the first SOPS ever issued. They were considered at that time only as items to be collected. Also issued amid some controversy were the white and meant to be yellow cards, which informed the troops of their obligations before opening fire and after arresting persons found violating the law. The instruction not to open fire if some one ignored an order to halt at check points was criticised. The staff officers loyally defended the measure knowing that the chance of a pregnant woman who was being taken past a check point being shot was not an option. In May 2006 this could have been considered treason after the AHQ suicide attack! Another controversial measure was the one that required the troops to inform the next of kin (NoK) where arrested suspects would be held. Here too their loyalty was worth more than a ton of cleverness that some of the detachment commanders displayed in criticising these measures.

At the end of the year I left Jaffna and I believe Parami went to Trinco. I left the army in 1981 for reasons that have no place here. We met again when the Gemunu Watch Ex Servicemen's Association (GWESA) was formed, and then regularly on our periodic visits to the Regimental HQ at Kuruwita. We saw how much Parami had done for the troops, especially the disabled who have a wonderfully well maintained swimming pool. The renovation of the Officers' Mess and the Library are examples of the super self-help efforts he made. He was also the moving force with Maj. Gen. Patrick Fernando in the recruitment drive that quadrupled the intake to the GWESA. Parami also took pains to ensure that new members' subscriptions were collected regularly. This has helped very much to enrich the coffers of GWESA. We had looked forward to welcoming him on his retirement in 3 months time. It was not to be.

In a personal note, I wrote to Parami a week before his untimely death, officially thanking him for helping GWESA.

Though the letter was official, I, for the first time in a letter, wished him and all ranks of GW the blessings of the Triple Gem. Everyone knew the dangers they faced.

Unfortunately he tempted fate.

May the country in this time of peril remember with gratitude and pride, the devotion and courage of Parami, Sergeant Gomez and Corporal Buddhika and all our brothers and sisters who while playing their part in establishing peace, goodwill and justice among the people of our land, have made the supreme sacrifice. Their efforts will not be in vain. We will not forget them.

May his stay in Samsara be short and may he attain Nibbana.

“Though with the last arrow gone,

My blood dyes heaven and earth,

My spirit shall return, shall return

To defend the Motherland”

(Poem by Japanese Lt. Gen. Ushijima just before he died in 1945)

Lalin Fernando

(Late Gemunu Watch)