

## **Down Memory Lane**

**By Late Major General V.Wimalaratne PSC**

I was one of the four officer cadets at the Indian Military Academy, Dhera Dun anxiously awaiting our unit postings. It was June 1963 and we were to pass-out by the end of the month. The posting order was received and I was posted to 1 GW. This puzzled all of us when we left Sri Lanka. In Dec 1961 there was no unit called 1 GW. However I decided to write to the Adjutant 1 GW requesting him to send me the pips and other accoutrement to wear on commissioning. I received a letter from the Adjutant Capt JG Balthazar stating that 1 GW was the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Gemunu Watch, the newest Infantry Battalion in the Sri Lanka Army. The letter further stated that items of uniforms of the new battalion have not been finalized and not to purchase any items. The Adjutant also welcomed me as the first officer to be posted directly to the Gemunu Watch.

On arrival in Sri Lanka we went through what was called an orientation course at Diyatalawa. Whilst at the ATC 1 happened to pass the CVF camp in civies one evening. I noticed some officers supervising young soldiers doing the “Monkey Rope” I was spotted by the commanding Officer Lt Col JF Halangode who promptly summoned me with the characteristic wave of his hand. When questioned I boastfully declared that I had done the “Monkey Rope” using various techniques at the IMA. To my horror the colonel promptly asked me to give a demonstration and I had to oblige in my walking out.

I Joined the battalion shortly afterwards as the 9<sup>th</sup> officer and was joined by 2nd Lt WR Wijeyaratne. There were only four YO's at that time. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants LT Fernando, GH De Silva, WR Wijeyaratne, and V Wimalaratne. Lt EC Fernando, the senior subaltern was the RSO. The Adjutant had the task of detailing the four of us for seven days duty week, invariably one of us had to do extra duty every week. On one such occasion I was on my fourth consecutive extra duty turn. The Adjutant Capt Lyle Balthazar was very firm and strict. He gives specific times at night to visit the guard. Fearing that I might over sleep, I had removed my shoes and kept my feet in a basin of cold water and with the alarm clock by my side I was reading a book. Alas I had fallen asleep and the alarm had woken up 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Gerry de Silva in the next room. Hearing no movement from my room he opened the door to find what he recalls to date “one of the funniest sights with me dozing off with my feet in a basin of cold water”. When he woke me up, I was about to dash the alarm clock on the ground, then he told me that the alarm did go off.

There were 450 recruits enlisted with the 31<sup>st</sup> recruit intake for the Gemunu Watch. Each one of us had to command three platoons. The first Anniversary was nearing. The Commanding Officer wanted to celebrate the occasion with a Battalion Week. At that time we had only an Headquarters company under Capt FP Chapman and a training company with Capt TI “BULL” Weeratunga as OC and Capt Mano Madawela as his assistant. WO1 Edgar Seneviratna was our first RSM and WO 11 Kenneth Zoysa was

the training company CSM. The CO decided to have inter platoon competitions which meant that the four of us (platoon commanders) had to take part in all events and three times in some.

The Battalion week was over on the BATTALION DAY on 7<sup>th</sup> December. This tradition has gone on ever since for the past 25 years. Company training culminated with a Battalion conventional Warfare Exercise on the Field Firing Range. We were digging trenches, patrolling, ambushing etc in the cold-misty weather with the permanent December drizzle. A swig of the “Smuggled Stuff” kept us going until the CO who arrived from Colombo ordered a withdrawal due to bad weather conditions. We withdrew to a hot cup of ginger and coriander.

On completion of training all of us were given Christmas and New Year leave whilst the married senior officers decided to “hold fort”. 2/1t Wijeyaratne and I went to the RHQ to collect our warrants when the ORQMS, WO 11 Stephen R arrogantly informed us that our commissions were not gazetted yet so as officer cadets we were entitled to 3<sup>rd</sup> class tickets only. A quick word with the Adjutant and this was sorted out. I received a telegram on 30<sup>th</sup> evening to report back immediately. What a disappointment it was as we had purchased New Years Eve dance tickets and were all keyed-up. Crestfallen I arrived at the Fort Railway station to find all the other fellow YO’s including 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants D Wijesekera, WMP Bandara and CL Algama who had just joined the battalion at the station. We were all guessing as to why we were all recalled. These doubts were soon cleared when the Adjutant and other officers met us at the Diyatalawa Railway station at 1700 hrs that evening. Each one of us were given the tasks of organizing a 31<sup>st</sup> Night dance at the CVF Officer’s Mess. Believe it or not we had a super dinner dance organized with many local guests in just for hours.

Our next move was to “seize” the Navy camp “RANGALA” which was to be taken over by the Gemunu Watch. In a lightning move we occupied the camp and in the process had unknowingly nearly arrested the CO’s of the Navy and Air Force units who were residing in the camp. This camp now named GEMUNU CAMP has been the Regiments home since then. Soon after, we took over the IMPERIL CAMP after 1 SR moved to Colombo and we were the overlords of Diyatalawa.

The Battalion formed in to four Companies in 1964 with Capt Weeratunga, Capt Madawela, Capt Roles and Capt Chapman commanding A, B, C and HQ Coys. In Jan 1964 we moved to Mannar for our first operational role- TAFI1 duties. The CO moved his RHQ to Thalladi camp and life soon became interesting with all sorts of activities. All ranks had to go about bare bodied waist upwards. Chest and Stomach measurements were taken to see which expanded faster; route marches were carried out to practice for the abortive LONG MARCH from Mannar to Diyatalawa. It was during a recee in a jungle harbour at Tantirimale that news was received of the promotion of Captains Weeratunge, Madawela, Chapman and Balthazar. What a jungle harbour it turned out to be: The Mannar spell was made interesting with the cyclone repairs and deployments in illupaikadavai, Silvaturai and Kallaru with the Engineer detachment under Major RH Perera en-route by the Aruvi Aru.

In those days we had a shortage of Platoon Commanders. Therefore we had to serve a further spell of TAF11 duties with the next company. Some memorable events were, the initial occupation of the base in the jungles of Illupaikadavai and Kallaru. Wild boar and deer would come into the camp. There was plenty of fish, cuttle fish were caught with the aid of a petromax lamp, MANIAM the tracker would take us through jungle tracks at night that we soon learned to live in and love the jungle. There was so much meat fish and vegetables like katu ala in the jungle. That the detachment hardly collected its army rations from Thaladi Camp. Search for Illicit immigrants in the Adams Bridge Islands and Iranativu in vallams and fiber glass dingies were exciting and full of adventure.

The pioneering days at CVF were memorable. The CO made all of us put forward designs for various items of uniform and sports kits. 2/Lt Gerry de silva was the favourite model. The maroon beret and silver grey hackle were vetoed by the Army Board and so the Battalion settled for the now famous Red Hackle. In formulating the dress the unit was never short of ideas, at one stage we nearly wore the Scot Kilts in keeping with the Black Watch Highlanders traditions. In those days Wednesday and Saturday were Garrison half days. All the officers would RV in the mess and soon telephone calls would come from hungry spouses about lunch. Invariably those sporty spouses, who were an integral part of the unit, would bring the lunch to the Mess and the weekend party would go on till Sunday.

Lt Col John F Halangode was a man never rested. He had a distant vision and draw us to achieve it. He had a burning desire to widen the narrow road in front of the Garrison Headquarters but was stalled by the Garrison Commander. One day he was acting for the Garrison Commander who was in Colombo, an emergency briefing was held in the Ops room and soon we were in charge of a specified number of trees with work parties in 48 hours all the trees were felled, rooted soled, cleared and the highway widened to the absolute astonishment of the Garrison Commander on his return. The Gemunu watch also pioneered agriculture in the Army. Potatoes and paddy were cultivated in Diyatalawa during the early days when potato cultivation was introduced to the island.

Soon the Battalion was winning Inter-unit competitions in Athletics, Boxing and Wrestling. The heavily partisan spectators in Panagoda and Colombo used to shout "Ala Goni" as our boxers and wrestlers downed their opponents. Athletics and cricket were our forte, The Gemunu Watch created a world record in defeating SLAOC by an innings and 534 runs in a one day match. The feature of the unit's success in athletics was the performances of the CO Lt Col Lyle Balthazar and Sgt Wimaladasa. I was the unit Adjutant to Lt Col Balthazar who was back in the field after a long lapse. It was sheer determination and guts that enabled him to defeat Majer Sarath Wijesinghe and Pte Andrew, Army's throwing champions. All I had to place a marker for the CO to zero and what joy it give us as he won every throwing events at the age of 41 years.

There were many more nostalgic memories during my days with the Gemunu Watch. These pioneering efforts greatly assisted and guided me in raising the Gajaba Regiment. The culmination of all these efforts came when I was given the honour and privilege of leading 1 Brigade during the victorious VADAMARACHCHI campaign. The Brigade consisted of the 1 Gemunu Watch and 1 Gajaba Battle Groups. The Battalion I was born to and the one I raised.