

House of God-Kalmunai 1981

Posted from Jaffna to Ampara

In January 1981 having served as Officer Commanding Troops Jaffna in 1980 (the only year there were no terrorist related deaths there since 1978) I was appointed the first Commandant of the Combat Training School (CTS) at Konduwattuwan, Ampara. (Before then I had a dramatic interview (one of several) with the Army Commander about my opposition to an attempt to post me to Colombo to take over a non combat unit). CTS Ampara was an exciting prospect as I had already held several appointments in training at Diyatalawa before including the training of recruit soldiers, officer cadets and officers. This appointment would be the most challenging as it mainly involved training combat teams consisting of infantry companies and a troop of armoured cars and artillery and elements of engineers and signals. Training is not only a priority duty for officers but also a very rewarding assignment.

The contrast between the Jaffna and Ampara was striking. While both places were hot and dry, Jaffna despite having a market garden (as well as a thriving fishing) economy was arid and had a hot wind (kachan) blowing at times too. Ampara was not only a part of the Eastern rice belt but was still 'koti walas' (leopard & bear) country with plenty of jungle, lush vegetation, huge artificial lakes called tanks dotting the landscape. The biggest tank was Senanayake Samudra (over 688,000 acre feet of water) at Inginiyagala, the lovely Ekgal Oya (Aru in Tamil) with the occasional leopard flashing across the villus as Maj Gen Sathis Jayasundera will recall. He and I shared many a training experience from Diyatalawa to Ampara to Silavaturai and were to meet up again in Ampara. There was also the most idyllic Jayanthi wewa near Wandinagala. Of an evening with a few fishing boats on it with distant hills over looking it and often the ever present elephants around it was always pleasant and relaxing.

Trouble brews

Around 2nd August (on a Monday?) in 1981 I was at Army HQ (AHQ) in Colombo for some conference when I was told by the Army Commander Major General Denis Perera to go to the radio room and speak to my adjutant on a radio/phone link as there appeared to be some trouble brewing in Ampara.

Tear gas to quell unrest in Ampara

I was told by the Adjutant Capt Ranjith Kaluarachchi that there had been some unrest in the town and the police had faced off a crowd by firing tear gas. However there was a danger that the situation could go out of control and the Hindu Kovil and the magnificent Kovil cart could be attacked. Curiously all Buddhists who came to Ampara to work, mainly government servants, would first go to the Kovil to make vows and seek blessings before they took up their appointments. They would also volunteer to pull the Kovil Vel cart during temple festivals. Ironically and very sadly at times of unrest it appeared they would with the townsfolk target the Kovil and the cart!

School children disagree and parents try to take the law into their hands

Apparently the present trouble started as a result of a disagreement amongst school children that had arisen when the Ampara schools had played against the Batticaloa schools at volleyball on Saturday in Ampara which resulted in heated responses of a like

kind when the Ampara school children had gone to some athletics event at St Michael's Batticaloa the following day. Much later when the respective Government Agents (GAs) recalled these events at lunch in the Irrigation Circuit Bungalow Ampara overlooking the salvinia covered Ampara tank for the benefit of the IGP Ana Seneviratne and the army chief of staff Brigadier Tissa Weeratunge who were on an orientation tour, Dixon Nilaweera for Batticaloa and Mr DA Ariyaratne for Ampara presented their side of the incidents with a fierce intensiveness that would have been worthy of gladiators. Here were two Sinhalese GAs battling it out with no holds barred one for Tamil and the other for Sinhalese/Muslim dominated turfs.

No troops available

I knew that there were no troops available to meet any internal security (IS) contingency at the CTS immediately without disrupting an on going junior commander's course which had been deployed for training some distance away. With their instructors who were all from the combat arms the course could have formed an IS platoon and effectively deployed but that would be done only as a last resort. In the army discipline came first and no court martial would ever be postponed because of external activities while training was a close second. So much so for the detractors including not only foreign media reptiles and local parrots and pundits but also one or two army commanders who referred to the army as a ceremonial army pre 1983. (In 1989 one of them was to gift the LTTE with weapons, ammo, explosives and cement from what he then believed was a combat army he commanded).

Adding a step to the sword

I reacted with considerable misgivings as I was 150 miles (6 hours) away, knew we had no troops other than some Pioneers in the camp and had little ability to influence events personally before they went out of control. I knew the first hours were critical in handling such events. I asked the adjutant to have an Internal Security platoon formed of the camp Pioneers (basically labour troops) but that he should ensure the 5 (five) Commandos who were an advance party of a Commando training team, were in the front rank. I told the adjutant to personally take the ersatz IS 'platoon' to the kovil before the mob got there. The adjutant somewhat agitated told me that the Pioneers were not trained to use rifles. I ordered him to issue them with shot guns. He said there were only 5 shot guns. I told him to issue the others with rifles as appearances mattered. He suggested they not be issued with ammo. I over ruled him and realized that the adjutant was in a panic and shaky. I determined to leave for Ampara immediately and informed General Perera who was in accord. But I had a problem as my 'staff car' a Customs seized bone shaker on worn out tyres was under repairs, at of all places in Kelaniya. No other vehicle was available. Meanwhile the mob had marched towards the kovil but on seeing the red berets of the SAS trained Commandos armed with Heckler and Koch sub machine guns (behind which the nervous Pioneers were probably praying), decided it was not their day saying "army karayo avilla appi yamu" (the soldiers have come we better get going). They knew the Commandos had no tear gas with them!

Flight back to Ampara

I contacted my driver and asked him to have his lunch, collect the car and report to me as fast as possible at my home in Dehiwala. By the time I got home I was told that I should contact Major Patrick Fernando (from my regiment) at AHQ. He to my relief informed me that an aircraft was leaving for Ampara from Ratmalana in 30 minutes and

I should be on it. My wife drove me to the airport in our private car. I was relieved to see a few Commandos also destined for Ampara but no aircraft. More Commandos reported in as we waited. We left a couple of hours later. I gave instructions to my driver on the phone to return to Ampara the next day as earlier scheduled as I had promised the Principal of the Hardy Technical Training Institute Mr. Sumanasekera a lift as usual when ever I came to Colombo (Mr. Sumanasekera was a Former Vice Chancellor of the Ceylon University. He was from my village Ambalangoda, knew my father and had been an officer in the RAF in UK during WW2).

Arrival

We arrived at Uhana airfield Ampara before dusk. I set off to the town after seeing that the Commandos reported to CTS for a briefing by Maj Ananda Weerasekera on the night's operations. The town had little damage and the vel cart at the kovil had been saved but the Tamils were frightened as they recollected earlier disturbances. The US Aid Americans who I knew well had fled after the tear gas incident. On their return the GA gave them beans as they had not bothered to ask him for advice nor get his permission to leave precipitately or not. They used to refer to the GA as Hitler as a mark of respect for his very stern demeanour. But the tension was palpable. The GA with whom I liaised closely had called for a conference that evening and I proceeded there post haste.

GA's Conference

In addition to the Police (ASP later DIG Bodhi Liyanage was there but I cannot remember whether DIG Leo Perera was too) and other civil functionaries was Cabinet Minister (Power) Dayaratne. The Minister spoke first and said the situation was serious/inflammable and the people were restless. He hoped we could stop any mischief before it happened. He then with a sang froid worthy of Field Marshal Hindenburg who slept throughout most of the great German victory over the Russians at Tannenburg in WW One, said he had to leave for Colombo immediately as he was due to fly to the USA for a conference and decamped! I breathed a sigh of relief as there would be no political interference of any great strength that could stymie me now.

Plans. Curfew and patrolling

I consulted with Bodhi and told the GA we would enforce a local night curfew and could have things under control but as we had only 30 soldiers for deployment needed many more troops to cover the district. I said that I would ask AHQ for them. I was not to know that Batticaloa would also soon come under me and my troop strength would increase to about 8 platoons half on them under Major Sathis Jayasundera (later Major General) from the now defunct Rajarata Rifles(RR)from Anuradhapura in Batticaloa and the other half including the already deployed Commando troop and 3 platoons from 2(Volunteer) Gemunu Watch (Galle) would operate under my no 2 Major Ananda Weerasekera (later Major General and now in robes who had taken over from Major (now General and Army Commander) Sarath Fonseka as Commander of the Junior Leaders training courses at CTS. The GA was relieved but we were not as we realized that except for the troop of Commandos we had no one else at present to deploy in the vast expanses of Ampara which had a good ignitable mix of the 3 main communities. We knew that it would take relentless day and night patrolling starting immediately not only of Ampara town but the surrounding villages (koti walas) and of hundreds of acres of paddy fields and scrub. It would be soft shoes (foot patrols) at night and flag marches

(the very next morning with the Commandos as a show of strength!) and mobile patrols by day that would discourage any would be trouble makers. We had to impose our will on them but until we got troops the Commandos would be flogged.

Briefing the locals

A lot of concerned civilians, mainly businessmen were called in next and I was asked to speak to them. I briefed them on the situation and how I would tackle it. I also told them that the Singapore army had sent a reconnaissance team to look for areas to do their jungle training and if they came the traders would have good business but the conduct of the people may have done some damage to that training proposal already. I asked for their cooperation. I also told them that I would be very strict with curfew breakers and not to ask me to spare anyone who broke the law. I knew these would be my supporters if everything was to go right and my opponents if they decided otherwise.

Hingurana Sugar Estate Tamil workers

I had only one problem since with them when a few towns' folk burned the rude shelters of the Hingurana State Sugar Estate Tamil labourers on the outskirts of Ampara town, hoping it was said to expropriate the land when the Tamils fled but were given a rude awakening when the ring leaders were arrested and remanded despite entreaties. I also told the Tamils they were safe there and should not vacate their premises under any provocation as I would guarantee their safety. I had no option but to set up my mobile (front seat of a Mitsubishi jeep) night HQ amongst the smelly 'quarters' of the labourers. It acted as a visible presence to up lift their morale and a deterrent to any would be miscreants. Later when the delegation from the CWC of Thondaman came with people like Michael and Joseph Michael as I remember, they were surprised how trusting the Tamil labourers were with me even though very regretfully I knew little of their language having played truant at the Tamil language classes both in Jaffna the previous year and 31 years before at Trinity College Kandy on Fridays before lunch.

Deployment of Platoons. Unrest in other Provinces

Very soon we had the Commandos under Lt Handapanagoda (later Lt Col and CO Commandos and now in the USA) at the SLBC station Malwatte (Malwattai) which was the 'border' of the Sinhala/Tamil settlements (with many inter marriages amongst the inhabitants) on mobile duty and 3 X GW platoons one at a temple at Dadayanthalawa under Lt Suriyabandara (who I had trained as a young officer and who sadly as a major died fighting the LTTE in the 1990s) to cover the lonely villages spread around vast acres of rice paddy around up to Mandur and another platoon for Ampara town duties and the third for the CTS camp in 'reserve' which was later deployed to cover the Hingurana sugar estate and factory and one RR platoon under second lieutenant Vijith Welikala (who later joined the Commandos and is now the owner of many security oriented enterprises), at Kalmunai. These young officers were superb. With Maj Ananda Weerasekara in complete control of operations from a forward base in Ampara town, I was free to visit the troops day and night. The adjutant was happy to remain in camp. Not surprisingly except for one death of a Tamil killed over a land problem not connected to race by a Sinhala policeman on leave in his home village, there were no other deaths in the 2 districts. In Batticaloa Maj Sathis Jayasundera (formerly Armoured Corps) and newly arrived SSP (later DIG) Randeni (looking like a human tank) ran a relentless well coordinated schedule of army/police foot and mobile patrolling and were seen everywhere spreading calm and possibly fear to law breakers as both had some

impressive physiques. Sadly while the 2 districts that initiated the crisis remained absolutely calm, violence spread to tea plantation areas in the Sabaragamuwa district and many lost their lives despite closer and quicker access physically and metaphorically to AHQ by red tabbed Colonels and others.

Trouble at Ampara hospital and Malwatta

One night there was a cry that the LTTE (called Kotiyas-leopard/tiger) were attacking the Ampara hospital. The police added to the panic by driving their vehicles at speed through the town and to the hospital even down steps. I checked the hospital and finding nothing wrong cautioned the police and asked them to get back on the roads and calm the townsfolk. I headed for Malwatta as I expected the panic to spread. It had and Sinhalese were withdrawing to the town for safety taking with them all their movables including their live stock. I saw to it that a road block was erected and ordered them to get back to their villages assuring them of military protection. They had little faith in the police. A few days later information was received that the Sinhalese of Malwatta were advancing on the Tamils there. I asked Major Ananda Weerasekera to send some troops there to head the mob off. He replied that there was absolutely no one. I got into my car with the driver and made it to the tank bund down which the Sinhalese mob of about 50 armed with a few shot guns but more with axes and knives was approaching. I confronted them armed with a sub machine gun and told them that it was the army which they had seen in increasing numbers only that had the right to intervene and not they and they should return to their homes. If it was thought necessary to ask for their help I would do so but they must now disperse leaving their guns behind. I asked a few who looked like leaders to identify themselves so that I could liaise with them in the future. By doing so I had got some key witnesses in case of more trouble and we both knew it. There was some initial hesitation before they questioned me as to how I would guarantee their safety. I said they have my word but if they took the law into their hands I would ask the army troops deployed to go back to Jaffna to perform more important duties. They listened, handed over a few guns and left. I was never more relieved as I had never before been more frightened. The prospect of facing off a mob alone even though wearing the country's uniform was an experience I never wanted to have again.

Batticaloa and Valachennai

Two Tamils were regrettably killed in the Embilipiitya Paper Milling factory (Monaragala District) which resulted in the Factory Manager at the Valachennai Paper factory off Batticaloa persuading his minister to ask and obtain from the MOD one platoon of RR to guard his factory and ostensibly his Sinhalese workers including the Union leader one swarthy very dark skinned Fernando. It became my unpleasant duty to tell Fernando on the advice of his manager one Hapugoda that he should leave Valachennai where he had his official quarters and go back to his native Negombo until the situation eased. He refused point blank but I was able to persuade him to leave with his and other Sinhalese families. I told him I would put a newspaper advertisement when the situation eased for him to return. To my consternation Fernando was back in 2 days and I had to go back there to tell him to go away. This time he told me that I could shoot him but he would not budge. I told him not to be foolish and think about it as I could not take the risk of having him back early. Fortunately I was told by the villagers that not only was Hapugoda against Fernando personally because of his union work but also that he was like a king in the village. I asked them what this 'king' talk was about.

Apparently Fernando was married from the village (all Tamils until Fernando arrived) not once but 3 times and had many children. Consequently he was considered a king as he had so many relatives and a big extended family in that village. I had a few strong words with Hapugoda who I then recalled had been with my elder brother Eshin (who had been a major in the army) at Trinity College. I told Hapugoda he wasn't actually a credit to that school. Dark skinned Fernando was cleared to come back to his 'kingdom'.

The incident at the House of God Kalmunai

Hero

Before the Valachennai interlude came the incident at Kalmunai where the priest of the Methodist church pre-empted and stole the show. It was actually the opening salvo of reasoning which defeated any attempt at conflagration whether intended or not and ensured that the 2 districts kept the peace. The hero was the Rev Sathiyarajah Thambirajah the priest of the Methodist church Kalmunai.

GA's meeting with priests

The day before in Ampara I met the districts' Christian priests and a 'Poozari (Hindu priest) who had come to meet the GA. They made bold to criticize the army in front of the GA. I asked them for specific instances and there were none. The RC priest (Croos?) who was from Mannar did his best to put the army to the sword but was not backed by the others. He thought I was from the Police. When they had finished I told them about how I visited the Dadiyantlawwa GW detachment at 3 am which was under Lt Suriyabandara. It was far from the main road and based in a temple amidst vast acres of paddy lands. He was responsible for an area reaching up to Mandur. Lt Suriyabandara was with soldiers patrolling on foot along the bund (niyara) of the paddy fields far from any supervision. I asked whether such commitment went with ill discipline too. Too rub it in I recounted that I being a Buddhist as the responsible Garrison staff officer, had one Sunday morning with my wife cleaned out the Garrison Church at Diyatalawa after a night of particularly strong rain had flooded it so that holding the normal service could be a problem. The cleaning had included taking out a long, soggy, heavy matting carpet and laying it out in the sun to dry. Suddenly one of the priests (Rev Perera?) who said he was sent by his church from Colombo to report on the situation said "I remember the incident and up to now did have a premonition I had met you before". There was a palpable easing of tension. I gave them all my contact numbers and the names of the officers commanding detachments to be contacted in case of any problem. I had not noticed the small made Rev Thambirajah then.

Orders from Deputy Defence Minister Werapitiya.

The next day I was informed that Mr. Sivasithampalam the TULF secretary and MP for Point Pedro were touring the province to see for themselves the condition of the displaced Tamils and that I should be around as he was with some Norwegians who might create mischief to entertain western media audiences. As soon as I arrived at the Kalmunia camp((comfortably housed in the Rest House) the detachment commander 2/Lt Welikala informed me that Mr. TB Werapitiya the Deputy Defence Minister had wanted me to call him. Lt Welikala had rightly asked that any orders to him be informed to me first. I rang through and the big man (who had been an outstanding student at my school Trinity and a cricket Lion) told me that I was to prevent Mr. Sivasithamparam's delegation including Norwegians from either taking photos of the IDP (refugees was apparently a bad word) camps or speaking to them as it was all in aid of creating a very

bad impression of SL abroad and spreading horror stories of Tamil ‘refugees’. I told Werapitiya I understood him fully but asked for guidance on the law as I was sure Sivasithamparam being a lawyer who I had met in Jaffna the previous year would immediately ask me the same question and query as to under what law I was going to stop him. Werapitiya was taken aback. He had been a Senior DIG in the Police before chancing his reputation by taking up to politics. He said he would come back to me. He never did. I prepared myself to face Sivasithampalam with much trepidation. I did not relish a situation where I would be forced to take action about a purely civil issue brandishing a weapon. I was not going to act as a bully while wearing my country’s uniform.

Sivasithampalan at the House of God

I then received information that Sivasithampalam (SS) was heading for the Methodist church to speak to the hundred odd ‘IDPs’. I entered the church with the priest’s permission taking care to hand over my weapon to my driver before I entered. I observed the tension in the people when they saw me in uniform inside the premises. I walked up to them and asked about their welfare. They said they were contended but wanted to know how soon they could go back to their homes. I asked for time.

Then came the impressive looking over 6 foot Sivasithampalam. Towering over tiny Rev Thambiraja, SS demanded to speak to the ‘IDPs’ who looked very like ‘refugees’ than IDPs to me. The small made just over 5 foot Rev Thambirajah offered him a cup of tea but said he could not speak to them. SS said he could and would as he had got permission from the Methodist church HQ in Colombo. The priest rising to his full height said SS could not as the Methodist church in Kalmunai was under him and no one could speak to the people there without his permission. I thankfully realized I was out of the firing line and that the small made priest had stepped into the breach with impetuous courage. He said “Brother we came from the same village (Pulloly) and went to the same school. You took the path of politics and I the path of God. This is God’s house and indeed it is only I who can decide who speaks to the people in it. You can’t”.

Jaffna Gentleman

Being a Jaffna bred gentleman of an impeccable background SS backed down. He did not fight back or threaten. However I was told just 2 weeks ago (May 2009) that SS had gently told the priest “brother you will regret this. Very soon this place will be covered in blood”. Prophetic. I lived to fight another day

SS’s tour continues

I accompanied SS on his fact finding tour south of Kalmunai and told him about how the Hindu temples of all places of worship refused to take in the displaced Tamils (due to caste problems even at a time like this). He told me “officer we too have our problems”. He asked me to help the “poor men as much as possible especially about their security”. There was no problem about food. We had work to do but I first reported to the Army Commander that a significant and peaceful victory had been won- by the Methodist priest. As the SL army officer son of a Buddhist father and a Methodist mother I was greatly relieved.

This is my salute to Rev Sathiyarajah Thambirajah of the House of God in the Methodist church, Kalmunia, even though 28 years late.

Lalin Fernando (Late Gemunu Watch)

Extracts from a letter sent me by a teacher PR Alphorns of 117 Tessitura Road Ampara dated 11 Jan 1982 (after I had retired with great regret from the army) whose own student had ‘fisted’ and slapped him simply because he was a Tamil.

“... I call it a miracle when the... carrying thestopped at my gate while the whole of Ampara had opened its mouth to grind the Tamils. And every other effort and arrangement that... organized to maintain the law of the Gods and man have lodged a permanent memory in my heart. Soldiers and officers who became friends after coming to my house said in a frank conversation that

...

I am back again at the same school (Ampara / MMV). The bridge that was destroyed in August 1981 has been made and the vehicle of goodwill and friendship more between others and I. No enmity or ill feelings and I hope and pray that more recognition and relationship be made between the communities of Sri Lanka and build an unbreakable national unity for the year 1982”.

May be it took longer but it looks good today.

(The boy who used his fists on his teacher was arrested by the army on a voluntary disposition made by his own brother. I informed his parents who were both Principals of schools in Ampara and sent them my car to come in it and meet me. They had tea with Major Ananda Weerasekera and me and spoke to their errant son after which they came back to me. I knew and the parents confirmed that the boy was strong headed and was too big for them to handle. They told me that they trusted me to do the correct thing by him. Major Weerasekera counseled him and it worked. We set him free later as the last thing we wanted was for him to end up with remand prisoners. The father said “while you were making inquiries about us we made ours on you too, mainly with the soldiers. We were afraid that you would victimize us on politics. We vote for the SLFP. The soldiers said that whatever you did was only by way of duty. They knew you were Sinhalese, probably Buddhist but as far as politics was concerned you had none”. I took it as a testimonial to all army officers from honourable and decent people who like ‘many a gem of purest ray serene’ are hidden in the dark unfathomable caves of this island’s politicized if not brutalized society!