

## **ON TO BATTICALOA EELAM WAR 11 1990**

It was 11<sup>th</sup> June 1990. Time 15.30 hours. I was about to sit for lunch having returned from Angunakolapelessa Detachment in Matara District which was established only two days before to combat increasing JVP insurgent activities. The telephone rang. It was from Director Operations Army Headquarters. The late Maj Gen WIV KM Wimalaratne informed me that the situation in Batticaloa was critical and that the LTTE had killed hundreds of policemen held there and the first Battalion Gamunu Watch detachments in Kiran and Kallady were under siege. He also told me that Kallady Camp could hold on for sometime but not Kiran. The situation in Kiran was really very bad, and that it may fall into enemy hands if reinforcement were not rushed there. He wanted me to close down all the detachments manned by my battalion and report to the Commander 23 Brigade at Minneriya within the next 24 hours in order to join up with the newly raised 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment to form a Brigade Group for immediate offensive operations to be launched into Batticaloa District.

I was the Co-coordinating Officer Ratnapura District in addition to my appointment as the Commanding Officer of 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gamunu Watch. My Battalion was deployed in the Ratnapura administrative District including certain areas of Matara and Hambantota District to combat increasing JVP terrorist activity.

By 1500 hours on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1990 I was ready to move with the Rifle companies and the support company. I proceeded with them to Kuruvita Camp which was 'HOME' to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gemunu

Watch and arranged the remaining companies to join us a.m 13<sup>th</sup> June 1990. All administrative arrangements were done at Kuruvita the same afternoon. Religious ceremonies to invoke blessings on all ranks of the Battalion were held at Kuruvita and Sumanasaman Devalaya Ratnapura in the evening.

13<sup>th</sup> June was my Wife's birthday. She was to join me at Embilipitiya since I could not get leave to go home during this time. With this new development everything had to be changed. I asked Ramani to travel down to Ratnapura and join me for lunch at Kuruvita on the 13<sup>th</sup> . We had lunch together and departed for our to different locations.

My Battalion arrived in Minneriya at 1730 hours. I reported to the Brigade Commander. Brigadier HS Hapuaracchi was very happy that we had come so quickly. Explaining the situation on the map he said that the immediate requirement was to established a Fire Base from which artillery could support Kiran detachment. This was urgent and had to be carried out without delay. Even a little delay would have given and opportunity to the LTTE to overrun Kiran. I was determined to carry out the task entrusted to my battalion without delay.

I decided to move in the night to Punani. At 2000 hours we left Minneriya. Brigadier HS Hapuarachchi too joined us. It was 2230 hours when we reached Punani Camp. I got my men to retire immediately after dinner. I sat with the company commanders to plan out the forward move from Punani Camp to a suitable location which could be secured for a Fire Base. Due to lack of intelligence about the enemy and terrain I knew it was going to be a tough job. I anticipated Siddhapura Railway Station (Punani) to be our first objective. It was strongly held by the LTTE and well secured with natural and artificial obstacles. All approaches leading to it were covered with a lot of Improvised Explosive Devices. To establish a Fire Base for 25 pounder guns I had to get

to within 10,000 yards of Kiran. So I decided on Meeyankulam as the most suitable location for this purpose.

At 0700 hours on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1990 the officers and men were ready for my briefing. I explained to the troops the purpose of the operation and internet of the higher command. I reminded the men of Dutugemunu's Battle for Vijithapura. I told them that Siddhipura Station had to be taken at any cost if we were to proceed forward. This was important for two reasons, firstly it hindered our forward move and secondly rescue of the 20 Sinhalese men in LTTE custody at the railway station was essential. It seemed to me that the story about the famous Vijithapura Battle narrated to them boosted up their morale.

After the Company Commanders verbal orders to their respective companies the Battalion moved out from Punani Camp at 0900 hours. When we reached the turn-off to Valachchenei on the main road the Battalion got into their battle formations. I had one Company North of the road and the other one South of it. I was moving with support Company along the road axis. Capt DAR Ranawaka, 4<sup>th</sup> Sri-lanka Artillery with his 25 pounder troop was in readiness to cover my move. Air support was not available to us until we Captured Batticaloa.

Troops could move only about three to four hundred yards from the start line, as the leading companies came out from the depression into the open both leading companies came under heavy fire from Punani Railway Station and two buildings located about hundred yards forward of the railway station and to the North of the main road simultaneously. Since the distance to the railway station was about six to seven hundred yards terrorist small arms fire was not very effective. I could progress about another 200 yards. But beyond this it was a difficult task. The area in front was completely open.

The leading troops were now well within terrorist effective small arms range. A number of soldiers were wounded while trying to move forward. Lieutenant S.Bandara one of the Platoon Commanders of the right leading company got a bullet to his chest while trying to move on to a machine gun position to check as to why the gun crew was not firing. The General purpose Machine gun had not fired due to some stoppages.

I requested Artillery fire support to neutralize the enemy position in front which was holding up the advance. Captain DAR Ranawaka and his men did a good job. Their firing was accurate and effective. We could advance a few more hundred yards. But it was very slow progress as we had to neutralize a lot of jony mines and other Improvised Explosive Devices whilst moving. The LTTE had reinforced their position with new cadres coming from Meeyankulam. At about 1330 hours the left leading company which was on the northern flank commanded by the late Major AB Alawathegoda made the final assault from the northern direction whilst the right flanking company commanded by Captain C Abeynayeka provided covering fire for the assault. By 1400 hours Punani Railway Station fell into our hands. The enemy withdrew taking their dead and wounded and leaving behind the Sinhalese captives in their custody. By 1500 hours troops could consolidate on the position. The railway station was captured with a big haul of terrorists arms, ammunition and explosive devices and warlike material. The rescued Sinhalese males were despatched to Colombo. **The rescue of those Sinhalese men in LTTE custody unscathed was a remarkable achievement.**

On the same day evening Vijayaba infantry Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel PP Fernando arrived in Punani. A troop of Armour and a troop of Engineers also joined us. By 1800 hours 3 Brigade Group was established under Brig AMU Senevirathne.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1990 at first light 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment broke out from Punani Railway Station. The initial break out was slow due to terrorist improvised Explosive Devices and Jony mines.

Terrorists started firing from the jungle about 800 yards away from the Railway Station. 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch Mortar Platoon neutralized the target. 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment cleared the area and advanced up to the T junction neutralizing two delaying positions. 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch took over the lead from there. Advance was a bit slow due to the jungle terrain and enemy sporadic fire from both sides of the road. Terrorists were trying to delay us as much as they could by firing at the leading troops. With our advance gaining momentum they withdrew towards Valachchenai. It took about one hour to neutralize the terrorist delaying position at Anicut Junction, they were deployed on either side overlooking the main road on the high ground. Terrorist positions on either side of the road were destroyed simultaneously. We had a few casualties.

The next day we were informed that the government and LTTE have had negotiations and a truce worked out. Because of this reason the advance was halted. We had to harbour in the teak forest nearby awaiting further instructions. The truce was not effectively observed by both sides. Many minor violations were reported. Finally on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1990 the LTTE violated it openly by attacking Security Forces in Palaly. We were ordered to commence the advance immediately.

By this time we were in radio contact with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch detachment at Kiran which was under siege. They were very happy that we were coming to rescue them. This had boosted up their morale and given strength to hold the detachment. They were without food and water and running short of ammunition. They had a number of soldiers wounded in the camp.

By this time a few had died due to injuries sustained. Due to the difficulty of burying the dead outside they had cremated them inside buildings. Roofs of certain buildings had been damaged due to terrorist shelling. Officer Commanding Captain S Perera was ill, but he was manning the radio and directing the defensive battle valiantly. A number of terrorist attacks on the detachment were repulsed.

On 18<sup>th</sup> June 1990, at about 1130 hours we seized Meeyankulam LTTE camp which is presently known as Cama Camp. After the capture of this camp I decided to establish the Fire Base there since the guns could provide effective fire support to Kiran from this location. Brigade Commander, Brig AMU Seneviratne visited the Gun Position to see it for himself. Having given certain instructions regarding the forward move to me and to Lieutenant Colonel PP Fernando Commanding Officer 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment he left for his tactical headquarters. After he left I summoned my "O" Group for orders. Whilst I was giving orders the gun positions came under terrorist mortar fire and long range direct fire from the far bank and the jungle patch adjoining the northern banks of Meeyankulam tank. Terrorist fire was however not very effective, a few soldiers were slightly wounded. We immediately cleared this area and commenced our advance leaving two Platoons from 5<sup>th</sup> (Volunteer) Sri Lanka Artillery for the protection of guns.

By evening we reached Nawallady. On our way terrorists tried to delay our advance by firing at the leading troops at one or two places. The delaying positions were manned by seven to eight LTTE terrorist with a machine gun. Terrorists could not break the momentum of our advance. At Nawallady I was getting ready to harbour, but the Brigade Commander wanted me to push the Battalion further forward, if possible to Valaichchenai and we did it. That night we harboured closer to Valachchenai bridge. In the night we were disturbed by sporadic LTTE small arms fire. But we

did not open fire since these were efforts by LTTE terrorists to probe and find out our dispositions.

On 20 June 1990 at 0600 hours Lieutenant Colonel PP Fernando Commanding Officer 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment established a Bridge Head to facilitate the Bridge Group to cross the Valachchenai lagoon. Brigade Group commenced the move towards Kiran at about 0830 hours with 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment leading. we expected heavy resistance while moving through the highly built up area, but to our surprise we received a rousing welcome from the civilians. They were lined up on either side of the street waving green placards and shouting welcome slogans. By 1130 hours the Brigade Group was in Kiran. LTTE terrorists withdrew towards Toppigala Jungles. When we entered Kiran camp we found more than a platoon of soldiers just lying down in a very weak state after inhaling some poisonous gas produced by some grenades thrown into the camp by LTTE terrorists. The majority of troops looked pale, it was due to a lack of food, water and also due to shock. The smell of burnt dead bodies was unbearable. Whilst we were clearing the area the medical teams attended to the sick and wounded. The single channel radio telephone in the camp was working. I telephoned our Regimental Commander Brigadier CL Algama who was the Military Secretary at that time. At the time I made the call he was at a conference in the Army Commander's Office. Lieutenant General H Wanasinghe was presiding. The rescue of Kiran was the best news they had after the induction of troops for the Eelam War 11. They were very happy and congratulated Commanding Officer 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment Lt Col PP Fernando and myself for the good job done.

Next day 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch troops rescued from the Kiran Camp were sent back to Diyatalawa on the advice of the medical experts. Before they left, the Late General Ranjan Wijeratne, the State Minister for National Security accompanied

by Lieutenant General H Wanasinghe, Commander of the Army and General Officer Commanding East Major General DL Kobbekaduwa visited Kiran camp by helicopter. They addressed troops, went round the captured Kiran Camp and congratulated all of us and left for another location.

The Brigade Headquarters was shifted to Kiran Camp from Punani. Guns were moved to Kiran to support the future operations of the Brigade Group. Both Battalions were engaged in clearing operations in valachchenai the next 24 hours.

The first task entrusted to the Brigade Group was successfully completed. The next task was to capture Batticaloa town from the LTTE as soon as possible.

Brigade Group commenced its advance towards Batticaloa at 0830 hours on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1990. Before the commencement of the advance from Kiran we received information that LTTE terrorists in strength were entrenched in a prepared position covering the main road at Kiran junction to meet the advancing troops and that the number of houses in that vicinity were booby trapped. 25 pounder guns took care of the terrorist position before we started. When we reached that location there were a lot of blood stains indicating that the 'gunners' had been very effective. Terrorists seemed to have withdrawn with their dead and wounded. In between Kiran and Sittandy terrorists exploded improvised Explosive Devices in two places but failed to inflict any casualties on our troops. Troops cleared two delaying positions at Sittandy and Vandaramulai.

From Kiran to Vandaramulai there was no human being in sight. It looked like a cemetery. Everybody living in the houses on either side of the main road and closer to it had vacated due to a fear of the Army. Later we found out that the residents in this area had

taken refuge in Kovils located in the interior. Nearly 10,000 men and women had taken shelter in the Eastern University premises Vandaramulai.

Brigade Tactical Headquarters was temporarily established at Chenkalady and the guns were also co-located with it. Troops consolidated in areas Sittandy, Vandaramulai and Chenkalady.

The welcome we received at Eravur was very encouraging. The entire community there welcomed us with open arms. It was similar to that at Valachchenai. Troops moved up to Urani Junction by evening on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1990 and harboured there. Brigade Tactical Headquarters moved to Sathurukondan. That night at Brigade Tactical Headquarters, Sathurukondan we planned out the operation to capture Batticaloa the next day.

The information available to us was that Batticaloa town was heavily mined and that casualties to our troops would be mainly from enemy Explosive Devices. We Were even shown a map of Batticaloa town indicating where terrorists had laid mines and Improvised Explosive Devices to prevent us from gaining entry into the town. Brigade group entered Batticaloa town and linked up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch at Kallady bridge by 1130 hours on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1990. There was absolutely no problem in gaining entry to the town. The town was very quiet. The residents were in their houses. No body had vacated due to any fear of the Army. There was no welcome either. Lieutenant Colonel HN Halangoda Commanding Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch walked across the bridge from the Kallady side to welcome us. Until late evening the sappers were busy locating terrorists explosive devices. There were no such Improvised Explosive Devices in thickly populated areas as we expected but found a few

land mines and Improvised Explosive Devices in a few places where troops could be accommodated. Troops occupied school buildings and the Railway Station in the town. The next day troops took the Batticaloa Island into their control and linked up with the Air Force Base. The causeway connecting the Air Force base and the island was damaged by terrorists. Troops unearthed a number of land mines on Lake Road. 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gemunu Watch established its Headquarters at the circuit bungalow on Lake Road and 5<sup>th</sup> Vijayaba Infantry Regiment at the Magistrate's Bungalow Church Road which was not occupied by anybody at that time. Brigade Headquarters shifted to the New Rest House.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> Morning we paid visits to religious dignitaries in Batticaloa town and explained the purpose of our coming to Batticaloa and future plans. They blessed us and assured the fullest cooperation.

The next few days saw troops engaged in a number of cordon & search operations to apprehend/destroy terrorist their arms, ammunition, explosives and any other warlike material used by them in liberated areas within the city limits.

Above all we saw a friendly populace greeting us and rejoicing that at last their freedom was restored.

