

ENVOI –BRIGADIER JOHN FREDRICK HALANGODE

Major General Lalin T Fernando

IF IT BE LIFE THAT AWAITS, I SHALL LIVE FOREVER UNCONQUERED: IF DEATH, I SHALL DIE AT LAST STRONG IN MY PRIDE AND FREE.

“SCOTTISH NATIONAL MEMORIAL.

Brigadier John Fredrick Halangode entered Valhalla, the celestial abode of warriors on 16 November, 1990. 18 years after he had retired from a very distinguished and honourable career in the Army of Sri Lanka. Brigadier John Halangode was an outstanding product of Trinity College in the 1930's where he excelled at cricket and rugby. He was commissioned into the Ceylon Light Infantry and served in it during the Second World War. After demobilization, he rejoined the Ceylon Police and when the independent Army of Ceylon was raised he rejoined the Ceylon Light Infantry as a Captain and later became a Company Commander. He attended training courses in the UK and Pakistan and was first, Officer Commanding the Army recruit Training Depot and when it expanded to become the Army Training Centre, Diyatalawa, he became the Second in Command and then Commanding Officer. In 1962, when a grave threat to the nation developed and it was decided by the Government to raise a third Infantry Regiment, John Halangode's selection to the post of Commanding Officer was axiomatic.

Brigadier Halangode raised the Gemunu Watch (King Dutugemunu's own). He commanded, trained and set the standard for what was soon to become, second to none amongst the Regiments of the Sri Lanka Army and which has since proved itself steadfast in the acid crucible of battle. He lived to see the Regiment in its finest hour yet when the first battalion's men under his own son, Lt Col Hiran Halangode (now Brigadier) heroically and against all odds, held Kiran in the Eastern Province in June 1990. The Gemunu Watch was Brigadier John's greatest gift to Sri Lanka and his leadership of the Regiment, which has now grown to 11 Battalions will not be forgotten. The Gemunu Watch and the name John Halangode will be forever one.

John Halangode was a born leader, full of ideas and infectious enthusiasm, physically far fitter than his peers and some of his subordinates mentally ticking like a time bomb, restless, fearless, full of initiative, very innovative and blessed with foresight, vision and a generous nature. He had a rollicking sense of humour, was straight as a ramrod, determined and a man of peerless integrity. He was representative of an elitist background but always able to understand the needs and wants of his most errant officers, humble private soldiers and the peasants of the Uva and Kandyan hills amongst whom he lived most of his life and for whom he had the greatest affection. He cared for everyone in the Regimental family even if he showed it in ways difficult to appreciate at the time. He had a pathological adherence of humbugs and but threw tact and caution to the winds. He was not a favourite of humbugs and pretenders, had not time for intrigue and cunning and was quick to tell those who lived off their wits and bluffed

for a living, especially if senior to him, where to get off. In most Armies, more so in Sri Lanka, such blunt, unconventional behaviour does not bring career rewards. Thus after commanding Colombo Force with the First Reconnaissance Regiment under command in 1972, Brigadier Halangode retired from the Army he had served with dedication and distinction, in circumstances which brought little credit to its top brass one of whom later traitorously ordered the handing over of a massive amount of weapons and ammunition to the terrorist. Brigadier Halangode as Commanding Officer of the Gemunu Watch, insisted on a high standard of training as he was a firm believer in the military adage that “sweat saves blood”. In the peace, time environment of the 1960s he was not popular with some of his superiors who saw the Army’s role as one only to exert pressure for political purpose. He knew the Army’s role was to defend the country not the politicians. He prepared accordingly. He built on a foundation of discipline and hard training in conventional war and then concentrated on counter insurgency and jungle warfare.

Gemunu Watch officers to date continue to provide the Army with some of its best tactical planners and field commanders, thanks to the professionalism Brigadier Halangode inculcated and inspired in them when they were young officers. He also believed that in any war in Sri Lanka much would depend on the marching ability of the infantry. He initiated long battalion marches, the best known being from Haputale to Ridiyagama, 71 miles through jungle, a must for all new entrants to the Regiment, officer or soldier, a “yomping” standard still to be emulated by others.

It is the done thing now to talk of national unity. However, it was Brigadier Halangode who in 1962, with his broad-mindedness, and passion for a national identity, ensured that the Gemunu Watch represented Sri Lankans of all races and faiths. The Regiment has from the time it was raised been blessed annually at its regimental day parade by religious dignitaries of the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Muslim faiths and this practice endures. It is probably the first Regiment in Sri Lanka that was commanded at one time or another by Sinhala, Tamil, and Burgher Commanding Officers a tribute to Brigadier John’s sagacity when building the officer cadre of the Regiment.

John Halangode excelled both at playing and in organizing games, be it cricket, rugby, hockey, tennis or golf, at club, army and regimental level.

The Gemunu Watch in his time became wrestling, boxing, cricket and athletics champions and at rugby and hockey, formidable opponents whom the victors would be happiest to avoid, The best known sportsman he produced being Asian games (Tehran) 400 metres gold medalist W Wimaladasa (now major). Brigadier Halangode’s name is also linked for all time with the Army’s agricultural efforts and the building of the only tank in Diyatalawa that now bears his name. It was this link with land and water that made him a compulsive and life long organizer of agriculture based ventures from land armies to defended villages, under the control and management of the people he trusted and loved best, servicemen, serving or retired. The future of ex-

servicemen was dearest and nearest to his heart and to the last he sought to involve them in projects for the national goos. He put up several schemes on their behalf, the last one on the forces sector, to the Government.

The regimental officers he commanded, trained and led in the Gemunu Watch alone include 7 Generals of whom Major General Wijaya wimalaratne stands out as probably the best field commander ever produced in Sri Lanka of whom two were commanders of the Army of Sri Lanka, and later envoys and many more were Brigadiers. To a man they followed him. Without (audible) question. Many of the officers he led would never have reached the high rank and position they later attained, if not for Brigadier John, because it was he who protected them when their careers were in danger and they themselves contemplated quitting.

His style of command had striking similarities to great but controversial military leaders may be within little Sri Lanka's scope. He like field Marshal Montgomery initiated a Regimental magazine, then the only one being published, to obtain funds for the unit when official fund raising schemes were, frowned upon by an inert top brass. When the Army's first mass blood donation campaign was initiated by the Gemunu Watch during its formative stage and his raw recruits balked at being bled because of their superstitious village beliefs that they would lose their virility, he personally went to their billets and marched them to the donating centre. Patton in the Uva highlands! He need not have exerted himself as his charming wife stood at the head of the queue and was the first to donate blood.

After dinner nights in the mess he would get all the officers to climb fox Hill in their mess kit and when they descended ask for volunteers to climb again. Remember Rommel and his Jaeger Regiment days? When he commanded there was never a dull moment. Brig John Halangode was the son of the famous cricketer and cricket coach John Halangode. He left behind him his beloved, wife Chandra who supported him loyally and who shared his successes and vicissitudes with equanimity and aplomb and his sons, the eldest, Hiran, who followed him in to the Army, in the finest of military traditions, and who having commanded his father's battalion, is now a Brigade Commander, Anil, Jayantha, Mahinda and daughter Savithri.

When the valkeriers rode out to single him out for Valhalla, his life's work largely done. John Halangode has passed on but he will be remembered with affection by all who had the proud privilege of associating with and serving with him.

Even as his memory will not fade amongst us who remain, his life's work, the indomitable Gemunu Watch and its traditions of valour duty and honour will remain forever.

