

In the forefront

Man who captured most territory

The 58 Division commanded by Brig. Shavendra Silva was in the forefront of fighting during the entire Wannu campaign, literally sprinting ahead of all other battle groups engaged in the massive operation. The campaign ended with the crushing of the LTTE on May 18 and the 58 Division was there battling the enemy to the very end. We caught up with Brig. Silva for a short interview.

Q- Though you are from Matale, we understand that you have some strong roots in Koggala, Galle. Can you tell our readers something about your family background?

A-My father is from Koggala. He studied at Mahinda College, Galle. He had been living in Koggala till his marriage. We still have properties there. Our relations are there and we go there at least once a year. Since my mother is from Matale the parents settled in Matale

Q-We heard that from a very young age you were interested in the army. A toy tank you got as a little boy is yet preserved in your home. How true are these reports?

A-I remember during the 1971 insurrection, when my father was the CTB Depot Manager, Anuradhapura (later he became CTB Chairman), the first vehicle that came to attack Anuradhapura town got stuck on the Nuwara Wewa Bund. The attackers left the bus there. I saw how the military took charge of the place. As you said I have a wooden tank that was given to me for my eighth birthday by my parents. It is still there. So I had a liking for the military.

Q-By the time you joined the army in 1984 all-out violence had already broken out. Didn't your family try to dissuade you from signing up?

A-Honestly at the time I was playing for the Sri Lanka schools cricket team and a cricketer for my school, St. Thomas' Matale. My idea was to continue playing cricket for the army. At the time the Army did not have any cricketers playing for Sri Lanka. So I thought I will stand a chance there. That was the reason I joined.

Q-Were you not badly wounded when you were about to get married?

A-I was badly injured in the Vadamarachchi operation when I was a second lieutenant. I was wounded for the second time during the *Jayasikuru*. The second injury was not so bad and I was already married by

that time. In Vadamarachchi I was in the last casualty flight before the operation was called off. With me in that flight there was one Major Uduge. He died later. In that incident my commanding officer Maj. Raj Navaratne got killed. Along with me another twelve got injured. Not only was I badly wounded, police had gone to my home and informed my parents that I had died and my body was being brought. My wife wanted me to leave the army. She also wanted to leave the country. I told her that I will come out after some time. Honestly I thought I might leave after my stint at the Diyatalawa training academy as the Peace Accord had been signed by that time. But no sooner had this war broken out in 2006 when the Muhamalai came under attack the Commander posted me there as commander of the Air Mobile Brigade. Although I had the idea, I thought it was not the time to leave. Although the family wanted me to leave, I never had any real idea of leaving the organisation.

Q- Was it not exhausting to take part in operation after operation from the time you signed up?

A-It is our duty and I don't consider it that way. An army officer should be able to withstand. An infantry officer has to understand his responsibilities.

Q-When we last met you in January 2008 your men were only engaged in probe attacks to draw out the enemy as they were trying to capture the Mannar Rice Bowl. Some so-called experts were even predicting that the 58 Division (then Task Force 1) will be swallowed up by the enemy in the jungles beyond the rice bowl long before they could reach Kilinochchi. Didn't you have any doubts about the enormous task ahead?

A-We were sure of what we were doing. As I told you at that last meeting that we were quite confident that we will win. When I met you in Mannar our aim was to cause maximum attrition. As you know by the end of the rice bowl we had managed to kill more than 2000 Tiger cadres in our part of the operation. I have been saying from the first interview that we are part of a winning team and that is that.

Q-Leaving aside so-called experts, even some of our leading politicians were continuously reciting the mantra that the LTTE cannot be defeated. Amidst all that how did you all manage to maintain the morale of your men?

"Officers of our rank whether we are fighting in the jungle or in the concrete jungle or wherever it is, it is our duty to maintain a certain amount of standards"

Brig. Shavendra Silva

A-Outsiders can say anything, but we being inside and those who were involved in the battle we knew the strength of our organisation. We knew that we were a professional outfit and where we stand with the LTTE. We have seen the LTTE for the last 30 years and we knew how they were behaving. It was a matter of good leadership with commitment and dedication. That paved the way. Good leaders were selected by the commander of the army, ably supported by the Defence Secretary and the President.

Q-At the time the Colombo 07 types were laughing at the enemy casualty figures given by the army. But what won us over was the power point presentation you gave us of casualty figures backed by photographic evidence from your then front-line headquarters. How did you manage to gather all those meticulous details and find the time to store them in such hi-tech fashion, while full time fighting a ruthless enemy?

A-That is called professionalism and nothing but professionalism. Officers of our rank whether we are fighting in the jungle or in the concrete jungle or wherever it is, it is our duty to maintain a certain amount of standards. We constantly update things in our computers. I must say the media also played a huge role. In this war the media brought the truth to the people. It is like a circle. Those who reported correctly, reported well. We believe in truth and the truth has triumphed.

Q-How did you manage to capture more ground than the other divisions?

A-Sheer dedication and commitment

by 58 troops with the proper direction and guidance of the Commander of the army. It may have been a long way, but we were really committed and every time the commander gave a target I wanted to finish the task one day ahead. I was always keen to finish what I was given and my aim was always to be successful. I don't believe in being second in anything. Throughout we have aimed to be the best. So my men performed accordingly.

Q-Your Division was literally sprinting. Didn't you worry about exhausting your men at some point?

A-When you are in a winning streak people don't feel tired. If you are not winning then the problems start. During the last stages my troops didn't even want to change.

Q- What was the most difficult time in the entire campaign?

A-It was the rescuing of civilians on April 20 at Pudemattalan. I rescued 117,000. The Commander when he gave us the task. Internationally they were waiting to see us going for a blood bath. That was the huge risk that I had to shoulder. But throughout that night the Commander was up and he was talking to me every half an hour or one hour.

Q-How many times were you able to go home on leave during that period?

A-In the last four and a half months, except for three days I have not gone home.

Q-Any unforgettable moments?

A-Seeing massive number of civilians coming out of the NFZ which was more than what we expected and how they all lost faith in the Tigers.

(RA)

