

INFANTRY INNOVATIONS IN INSURGENCIES: SRI LANKA'S EXPERIENCE

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How do you defeat a rebel army? An army that grew from the smallest insurgent cells, using terror as its prime tactic, to a fully manned force with artillery, an air wing, naval units, and elite suicide cadres? How do you remake yourself during a conflict in a way that leads from stalemate to victory? Look to the Infantry.

The Sri Lankan army had just such an experience. They fought for many years against a separatist movement that had evolved into an insurgent state. Facing an impasse on the battlefield, leaders and men rethought their tactics and revived infantry fundamentals.

Background of Conflict: Cycle of Cease-fires

The Eelam War began in 1983 as the long-term tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations erupted with riots, killings, and government response. This initial outbreak set the tone for the long bloodletting to come. The first cease-fire between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) began in July of 1987 and was followed by the Indian army intervention on the island.

The Indian army fought with the LTTE and established a peacekeeping effort which lasted until the withdrawal of the Indian army three years later in March 1990. Fighting resumed between the LTTE rebels and the government of Sri Lanka in June 1990, marking the beginning of Eelam War II. The Sri Lankan army was locked into positional defense for the next five years of conflict. From these fixed positions, they used conventional formations and tactics, seeking to clear rebel-dominated areas. During this time, the LTTE conducted terror acts and unconventional warfare throughout the island.

International forces and domestic political realities led to another cease-fire in January 1995. It was short lived, however, because of violations of the cease-fire, terror attacks, and changes in political will. This led to Eelam War III in April 1995. For six years, the Sri Lankan armed forces fought to stave off disaster and protect the Sri Lankan people. During large-scale operations, the Sri Lankan army often advanced on narrow fronts to minimize movement and logistic difficulties. This allowed the LTTE to concentrate defenses along a single axis of advance and stop the much larger force.¹ Then, by infiltration and maneuver, the LTTE would strike at weak points along the extended line of advance to great effect.²

The LTTE consolidated territory and created a position of strength. International pressure once again led to a cease-fire which lasted five years. This long hiatus allowed the LTTE to transform from an insurgent force to a rebel army. They amassed artillery, created naval and air capabilities, and expanded a land



force replete with dedicated and deadly suicide cadres.³ Renewed terror attacks, natural disasters, and political changes weakened the cease-fire agreement, and the fourth and final Eelam War began in July 2006. The LTTE was once again poised to “combine guerilla warfare, positional defense, and IEDs (improvised explosive

devices) to slow down and inflict heavy casualties by the extensive use of indirect fires.”⁴ The Sri Lankan army, however, had also been preparing during the cease-fire. Innovations in infantry training, organization, and employment — along with the efforts of all the armed forces — led to the government’s final victory in May 2009.

Initial Use of Infantry

The conventional tactics of advancing infantry formations along linear avenues of approach and seeking to penetrate fixed defenses proved to be a meat grinder for the Sri Lankan army. The LTTE used freedom of movement to infiltrate the flanks of these formations and then strike against the column in depth. When the army columns were delayed by IEDs and obstacles, LTTE artillery and mortars were brought to bear with deadly accuracy.⁵

Over the years, this pattern replayed several times as government offenses were stalled by the LTTE and cease-fires were declared. During these lulls, the LTTE was able to rest and refit while strengthening defenses and choosing the next target. It was during this last pause in 2001-2006 that the senior leadership of the Sri Lankan army realized they had to do something different to change the results in the fighting that would inevitably return. In 2001, during the final stage of a failed divisional operation to clear LTTE positions in northern Sri Lanka, heavy battlefield casualties led to a new concept in infantry tactics. The division stalemated and several small units were missing in action. Unexpectedly, three squads of soldiers made it back to friendly lines after traversing miles of guerilla-controlled territory. This led Infantry leaders to conclude that small units of infantry — with the proper training, organization, and equipment — might be effective within the LTTE area.⁶ They needed to make changes to avoid the failures of the past, and this could have been the answer.

Analysis of the past combat experiences pointed to the success of the special forces and commandos in disrupting LTTE operations and striking fear into its leadership.⁷ These forces were successful in the close battle as well. Over years of brutal fighting, these elite forces had perfected small unit combat deep within LTTE-controlled areas.

These special forces had their beginnings in 1985 in the



Photos courtesy of Sri Lanka Ministry of Defence and Urban Development

Sri Lankan special forces soldiers were experienced in both the conventional and unconventional aspects of infantry warfare.

midst of Eelam War I. A small group of two officers and 38 men conducted operations deep in LTTE-dominated areas. They were known as combat tracker teams. They were created under the guidance of then Major G. Hettiarachchi and Lieutenant A.F. Laphir.⁸ In December 1988, the unit was officially designated as 1st Regiment Special Forces and expanded to four squadrons. Over the years, they became a vital force that was relied upon for deep reconnaissance and raiding. By necessity, they had become the force of both first and last resort during the long civil war. On the eve of Eelam War IV, they were experienced in both the conventional and unconventional aspects of infantry warfare.⁹ Their hard-won expertise laid a foundation for the building of the new special infantry operations teams (SIOTs). The special forces and commandos provided a template for equipment, training, and tactics for the infantry to build on.

Shift to More Aggressive Leadership

Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka was promoted in December 2005 to head of the Sri Lankan army. This signaled the political leadership's commitment to more aggressive leadership and dedication to a final victory. Fonseka was known for his focus on results in combat that weakened the LTTE at all levels and built toward further success. He was quoted by V.K. Shashikumar in the July-September 2009 issue of *Indian Defense Review*, speaking about how he selected his commanders:

"I did not select these officers because they are young. But they were appointed as I thought they were the best to command the battle. I went to the lines and picked up the capable people. I had to drop those who had less capacity to lead the battle. Some of them are good for other work like administration activities. Therefore, the good commanders were chosen to command this battle. I thought seniority was immaterial if they could not command the soldiers properly. I restructured the army and changed almost all the aspects of the organization..."

Successful and aggressive brigadiers were given command of new formations trained to close with the enemy and create battlefield advantage by defeating the enemy "at their own game and in their own backyard."¹⁰

Expansion of Innovation to Infantry

The most innovative aspect of the Sri Lankan army's adjustments after the 2001 to 2006 cease-fire was the organization of 12-man teams within infantry battalions. These acted independently within the four-kilometer frontline zone that marked the limit of these lead elements. Abandoning the traditional practice of a fixed forward line with major units massing against narrow frontages, the infantry battalions were organized into small units to patrol along the forward line of own troops (FLOT) to make contact with the LTTE cadres and press the attack on a broad front. This took away the freedom of movement LTTE elements had enjoyed over the decades of civil war.

Special Infantry Operation Teams

Concept and Training

Many factors contributed to the development and implementation of the SIOT concept. Much credit goes to the Sri Lankan serving officers' ability to be self critical. Long hours of soul searching and sharing the stories of combat failure from the earlier days of the conflict led to "prudent analysis." In recognition of the sacrifice of fallen comrades, officers and men rededicated themselves to the difficult task of combat innovation. They developed a training program that mixed the Sri Lankan infantry's conventional past with the hard-won lessons of years of unconventional warfare. The innovative concept of creating small SIOTs drew from the special forces experience as well as capitalizing on simple villagers' inherent field skills.

The Sri Lankan army lost 6,000 soldiers during Eelam War III, with as much of 90 percent of those casualties being foot soldiers. These losses left the infantry in need of an overall "rejuvenation" due to the need to replace these casualties and the planned expansion of operational forces.¹¹ During the cease-fire that ended Eelam War III, advanced platoon training began to reestablish morale, unit cohesion, and a baseline of infantry competency across the force.

All the nations of South Asia share the military legacy of the British imperial army. British doctrine and force design permeated the headquarters down through the rank and file. After decades of combat experience, the leaders of the Sri Lankan army had learned the hard lessons of fighting in the jungle. Infantrymen at all levels felt the need to move away from past doctrines and address "a modus operandi suitable to Sri Lankan environment."¹² The transformation to small teams began. The SIOTs concept was implemented from the ground up — not from an institutional base or from the top down.

The training was extensive and lengthy. After completion of the 44-day advanced platoon training course, select soldiers continued with the SIOT course for additional weeks. This took over three months and "included combined arms, joint warfare, and real-life exercises inclusive of close air support."¹³

The SIOTs were spread out through the infantry battalions of the army. Each rifle company had six of these teams that passed on their skills as instructors. Infantry skills were improved in all formations. By 2006, some infantry companies were completely manned by SIOT soldiers.¹⁴ This level of skill allowed the battalion commander to dominate a broad front that extended 4-5 kilometers in depth. "The concept exploited the inherent traits of the

infantrymen born and bred in villages and possessing the same attributes as a guerilla such as familiarity with jungles, robustness to endure hardships, and the free, uncaring attitude of operating independently.”¹⁵

SIOT Training

Equipment

Special forces selected weapons best suited for close combat in the jungles of Sri Lanka. The SIOTs adopted and adapted these choices for their own use. A silenced 9mm MP-5 submachine gun maintains stealth and avoids immediate compromise upon contact. Enemy individuals or small outposts could be killed or suppressed without the noise of conventional infantry weapons. The limitations of the 9mm round meant that this was a specialized weapon. Each SIOT member was trained primarily on the AK-47 variants and the light machine guns of the same caliber (7.62x39mm), as well as the medium PK machine gun (7.62x54mm). RPG-7s were carried for assault and to break contact. Thermobaric and high explosive rounds were routinely carried for greatest effect, and Claymore-type mines were used for protection when stopped and for conducting ambushes.¹⁶

Commercially available GPS devices assisted with navigation and control of indirect fires. Night vision devices were sought by all the teams but were in short supply. These were especially useful in surveillance and target acquisition.¹⁷

Experience in Battle

With the focus on highly trained infantry teams, combat became more decentralized. Teams conducted combat operations without officers present. Planning was conducted jointly by officers and men while decisions were made in the field by sergeants. This required initiative by all ranks and led to innovation in tactics and techniques.

During the final Eelam War, there was a marked change in morale and mission focus. “Most of the men and nearly all of the officers in the 55th Division were veterans, many of them with long years of service in the Eelam War. A seasoned force, the Sri Lankan army had gained from their previous experiences. Not only was morale consistently high, the mentality was now very different. Previously hesitant, hidebound, and beleaguered, they were now confident, self-reliant, and resourceful; this was the new Sri Lankan army. It had been a remarkable transformation.”¹⁸

These four-, eight-, and 12-man SIOTs operated across the battalion frontages seeking contact with the enemy.¹⁹ Out to a depth of four kilometers, these independent teams disrupted LTTE reconnaissance, pushed in outposts, and called in fire support against enemy concentrations. This created uncertainty for the LTTE, not knowing from what axis to expect the Sri Lankan army. The jungle was no longer the sole domain of the enemy.

At night, the teams remained well forward as listening posts and conducted ambushes

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along avenues of approach. This helped secure the area of advance and protect the forces in the rear from surprise attack or flanking movements. General Fonseka was quoted as remarking, “Those days (before SIOTs), we always advanced in battalion strength. We would advance for about two kilometers and then wait for artillery support. Now, we got used to going much further forward by ourselves; sometimes we would go out more than eight kilometers in a day, sometimes 12. The enemy didn’t know where we would be or what we would do.”²⁰

SIOTs Zone of Attack

The teams maintained their separate actions for days, carrying their own supplies, establishing caches, and living off the land as much as possible. Night combat also increased. Previously, the Sri Lankan army ceased actions at night. Only Sri Lankan special forces fought day and night. With the advent of the SIOTs, this changed; the LTTE no longer owned the night. Not only did the infantry formations move and fight at night, but they maintained the tempo of attacks over several days, with no fixed number of days or periods of time to limit them. Operational phases became more unconventional and unpredictable, putting the LTTE at further disadvantage.²¹

With so many small units deployed, the lack of communications equipment was a constant problem. Overall situational awareness suffered “and occasionally resulted in fratricide.”²² The teams struggled to master the arts of camouflage and moving undetected while maintaining communication with their parent units and fire support.

Brigadier R.A. Nugera summarized the battlefield experience of the SIOTs at a defense seminar held in 2011.²³ He emphasized their success in operating “on wide fronts, infiltrating, and striking the terrorists from the front and the rear.” These small unit operations took time and “lacked momentum in a conventional sense.” It required patience to gather the battlefield intelligence needed to dominate. “The LTTE finally lost the contest for the jungles, their critical bases, their social rents, and ability to wage



Sri Lankan soldiers cross a body of water during operations on the Wannu battle front.

classical guerilla warfare,” Nugera said. The SIOTs suffered heavy casualties in this aggressive, constant contact endeavor, and this required a steady program of on-the-job training as new infantry soldiers joined the SIOTs already in the field. Nugera explained, “The actions of these teams compelled the LTTE to commit more cadres and reserves to contest the jungles, and this denied them of much needed reserves to counter other security force operations.”

As the Sri Lankan infantry took the fight to the LTTE on their own turf, they began to dominate the elements of time and space. They found that most of the LTTE cadres had “very basic training and relied most of the time on familiarity of terrain and freedom of action rather than actual developed skills.”²⁴ The SIOTs proved to be the superior fighters.

Conclusions and Key Lessons Learned

The Sri Lankan army leadership agreed, “The key unit in recent operations has been the special infantry operations team.”²⁵ The success of the SIOTs is most commonly attributed to their endurance, their ability to merge with the landscape, and their ability to develop the combat situation to their advantage and bring the superior firepower of the Sri Lankan forces to bear. “The SIOT was developed as a concept by the infantry to fight and defeat the LTTE in sub-conventional, guerrilla, and counterinsurgency warfare. The concept exploited the inherent nature of the infantryman, born and bred in villages and possessing the same attributes as a guerrilla.”²⁶

Key lessons learned from this operational experience include the need to conduct “in-stride” training to replace combat losses and not degrade operational capability. Perhaps even more significant was the impact the SIOTs had on the overall Sri Lankan army. This “battle-tested doctrine” was formulated “in real time” and “served as an engine to inspire the infantry.”²⁷

Created to face the LTTE in the jungles, the SIOTs established new standards for the infantry as a whole:

- Improved tactical intelligence
- Continuous surveillance of the battle area
- Timely and accurate target acquisition
- Reduced casualties through dispersion and stealth
- Reduced civilian casualties by precision in operations

The success of the SIOTs in dominating the near battleground freed the special forces from the close battle and allowed them to be used in their classic role of deep penetration against critical and high-value targets.

Jungle warfare requires small groups that know the jungle and feel at home there. U.S. forces in Vietnam, especially special forces and long-range reconnaissance patrol units, learned these same lessons. Extensive task-focused training is a necessity. Weapons sets must include large-caliber automatics that can defeat the jungle foliage and suppress a close enemy. The expert use of explosives for assault and ambush are needed as well. Most importantly, aggressive leadership is needed at the team and section levels. Without the aggressive corporals, there will be no success. Finally, a level of trust was established amongst the echelons of leadership. Traditional command and control gave way to trusting the team leader with the freedom to accomplish the mission.

As Nugera told the world in 2011, “ultimate success came on the ground by winning the patrol skirmishes. By contesting the LTTE in the dense jungles of the north and the east and by confronting and defeating the deadly suicide cadres... It became the infantry

way of war. It resulted in the LTTE being overwhelmed in an expanding torrent of small group operations which they could not match qualitatively or quantitatively and so were defeated.”²⁸

Notes

¹ DBS Jeyaraj, “An Operation Drags On,” *Frontline*, 13-26 December 1997, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1425/14251260.htm>.

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³ Major General Chagi Gallage, “Operations in the East,” <http://www.businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=3484>.

⁴ Brigadier Ralph Nugera, “Evolution of Training,” <http://www.businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=3487>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brigadier Ralph Nugera, “Evolution of Training,” transcript from video of presentation given at the “Defeating Terrorism - Sri Lankan Experience” seminar held 31 May – 2 June 2011.

⁷ Fernando, “Army’s Admired Innovations.”

⁸ Sandun W., “The Heroic Saga of the Special Force: ‘I Who Would Not Dare to Give in to the Enemy,’” *Lanka Help Magazine*, 12 October 2011.

⁹ <https://lrrp.wordpress.com/2011/06/13/use-misuse-of-special-forces-in-sri-lanka-%E2%80%9494-does-the-sl-army-need-to-rethink-its-special-operations-doctrine-david-blacker%E2%80%99s-blog/>.

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¹¹ Nugera, “Evolution of Training.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “85 More Pass out After Buddy Trio Training,” <http://www.nationalsecurity.lk/fullnews.php?id=26227>.

¹⁴ Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, “Strategic Analysis of Sri Lankan Military’s Counter-Insurgency Operations,” *Future Directions International*, 12 February 2012, 2.

¹⁵ Nugera, “Evolution of Training.”

¹⁶ “LTTE Commander killed in Claymore attack,” *TamilNet*, 10 June 2006, <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=18457>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda, “Sri Lanka –The Last Phase in the Eelam War IV,” *Sunday Island Online*, <http://www.island.lk/2009/09/13/features2.html>.

¹⁹ Udara Soysa, *Terrorizing Terrorists, Understanding the Successful Counter-insurgency Campaign in Sri Lanka* (Zeilan Press, Massachusetts, 2009) 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nugera, “Evolution of Training.”

²³ Sandasen Marasinge, “Defeating Terrorism - Sri Lankan Experience Seminar,” *Daily News*, 2 June 2011, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2011/06/02/news22.asp>.

²⁴ Nugera, transcript.

²⁵ Colonel HP Ranasinge, “Sri Lanka Looks to Special Forces Lead,” *Soldier Modernisation*, Vol. 7 June 2011, <http://www.soldiermod.com/volume-7/sri-lanka-scial-forces.html>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nugera, transcript.

²⁸ Ibid.

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