

Sri Lankan 4th ARMoured REGIMENT – Wheels to Tracks

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DEDICATED TO THE GALLANT MEN OF 4th ARMoured REGIMENT WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

The long fought battle against separatist insurgency was in its first decade when the Sri Lanka Army introduced the main battle tank into its arsenal. Their effort in creating a new unit, procuring the vehicles, and preparing this unit for combat is a heroic episode in modern armour history. The lessons of combat are hard won and should be studied by those who take up the profession in defense of their own countries.

The 4th Armoured Regiment's story is one of leadership, dedicated service, and final victory. This is the

story of their proud beginnings as told by their first commanding officer.



Type: T-55A MBT ¹

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http://www.armouredcorps.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=122%3Aour-old-memories&catid=25&Itemid=9



Evolution of the Concept

The separatist conflict in the north and east intensified in the late eighties. This created a growing need for greater fire power and cross country mobility in the battlefield. The undulating sandy terrain of the Jaffna Peninsula, the western sea-board of Mannar District, and open dry paddy fields with earth bunds of the Eastern Province were impediments for wheels. They became increasingly vulnerable to RPGs as they slowed down on sandy soil or when the bellies were exposed in

surmounting earth mounds in paddy fields. The 76mm main armament of the Saladin armoured car became less effective against a determined and ruthless enemy fighting from hardened shelters and underground bunkers. Heavier firepower, on a mobile platform with better cross-country capability was desperately needed.

Though the need was recognized and supported by serving officers in operational areas, senior Armoured Corps officers had strong reservations about introducing tracked vehicles to Sri Lanka. One retired senior Armoured Corps officer holding high government position in an emotional outburst said “Tanks over my dead body!” Aversion to tanks was difficult to understand. It could have been the emotional attachment to wheels, false apprehensions about tracked vehicles, or lack of understanding about modern

tracked vehicles. A reluctance to introduce battle tanks to fight a home-grown insurgency or the inability to break loose from the “wheels mentality” may have been other reasons.

The term “tank” is generally viewed with concern and caution. It is a weapon system with enormous destructive power and the employment of tanks has both political and military implications. Such concerns kept the debate on tracks versus wheels alive but did not make much headway. As the war escalated and the need for heavy fire support for the infantry became more evident, the army began to re-examine the need for tanks. Capital expenditure and prohibitive support and maintenance cost were major concerns. Type of armament, combat weight, night-fighting capability, fuel type, and the Navy’s sea lift capacity were tactical and technical

considerations that impacted the decision on the type of tank needed.

In early January 1991, I was serving as Commanding Officer 1st Reconnaissance Regiment. Major General Waidyaratne, Chief of Staff of the army, and serving senior Armoured Corps officer, summoned me and Commanding Officer 3rd Reconnaissance Regiment Lt Col Nihal Marambe for a discussion on main battle tanks (MBT). Inquiries were made about the T-55 MBT. Lt Col Marambe and I had been exposed to the tank briefly during the Young Officer Course in 1974 at the India Armoured Corps Centre and School, Ahmednagar, India, but had no hands-on experience on them. The T-55s were front – line battle tanks of the Indian Army during the early seventies and were classified (off limits) for foreign students. Consequently, we

had received training on the older Centurion MBT.

The end of the Cold War in early nineties saw down sizing of Warsaw Pact armies with thousands of ‘T Series’ battle tanks available for sale in the cash strapped former communist bloc countries. One such country was Czechoslovakia. The Sri Lanka Army examined the available options and decided to procure a less sophisticated but versatile battle tank. After much deliberation, debate and discussion, a decision was made to acquire the Czech built T-55 MBT. The Sri Lanka Armoured Corps was on the threshold of evolving from wheels to tracks, a much awaited desire of the Army’s cavalrymen.

Visit to Czechoslovakia

In August 1991 an eight-member Technical Evaluation Team headed by the Regimental Commander Brigadier T.

Paranagama, two officers from Sri Lanka Electrical and Mechanical Engineer Regiment, an Ammunition Technical Officer from Sri Lanka Ordnance Corps, a Technical Officer from Signal Corps, myself, Lt Col NR Marambe, Commanding Officer 3rd Recce Regiment and Majors Aruna Perera and Milinda Peiris left for Czechoslovakia. The mission was to evaluate the T-55 MBT and submit a report to the Ministry of Defence.

Czechoslovakia was an East European Communist country that was a former member of the Warsaw Pact military alliance. It manufactured T-55s under license from the former Soviet Union and was considered to be the most technologically advanced country among the ten member states. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early nineties the Warsaw Pact disintegrated and Czechoslovakia broke loose from Soviet

influence and became an independent state. The country had two major ethnic communities – Czechs and Slovaks. In the late nineties when Eastern Europe transformed, many new independent states emerged based mainly on ethnic composition. Czechoslovakia separated peacefully and became two Republics – The Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.



Zvolen, Czech Republic ²

The Technical Evaluation Team arrived in Prague, capital of Czechoslovakia, and we were taken to

² <http://www.tourist-channel.sk/zvolen/indexen.html>

the Czech Armour Centre in Brno for a briefing and display of equipment. We later travelled to a picturesque little town about 200 miles southeast of Prague called Zvolen, which housed a huge tank yard. Next day, the team was taken to the yard holding hundreds of canopy covered tanks. There were T-55s, T-62s and latest T-72s. The Sri Lanka military delegation was mandated to select twenty-five MBTs, so we were escorted to a corner of the yard and shown some parked tanks. They certainly were not the best in the yard.

Sri Lanka's desire to procure a mere twenty five tanks did not seem to interest them much and the response was naturally lukewarm. It was later known that the Czechs were expecting an Iranian military delegation in the following week to procure five hundred tanks. Consequently, Sri Lanka's purchase and the visiting delegation

were of little significance. The hosts spoke very little and expected us to accept the twenty five tanks chosen by them without causing any inconvenience. Following a casual walk around the huge yard, we saw new tanks that had hardly been used. They were scattered and mixed up in a huge maze of steel. It was stunning spectacle to see such a huge collection of battle tanks. One wondered what devastation there would have been, had the Warsaw Pact fought a war with NATO in Eastern Europe.

The Sri Lanka team members had a daunting task ahead of them to persuade the uncompromising Czech Army hosts to agree to sell the better weapons. It meant churning-up the entire yard just to pull-out a few good tanks. Traditional Sri Lankan charm did not bring the desired results until one of us noticed young Czech soldiers

inquisitively scanning the Gold Leaf cigarettes smoked by some team members. That gave us a hopeful breakthrough. Cigarettes were politely offered and there was a spontaneous change in body language and attitude. They were now willing to move a few of the good tanks but not all of them. As time passed team members were able to break the ice and generate some friendly conversation. It was casually mentioned that back home, Sri Lankan military folks enjoyed a good drink and Scotch Whiskey was the preference. The Czechs were told there were enough stocks in the hotel and an invitation was extended for an evening get-together. The hosts headed by a senior regional tank formation commander dropped by at the hotel later in the day. Duty exempted whiskey carried by the team was generously offered.

Classic Sri Lankan hospitality and benign diplomacy changed the Czechs. Hard nosed, uncompromising attitudes seem to melt faster than the ice cubes in whiskey glasses. Everyone had fun and enjoyed the evening. Late in the night, before saying good- night to the Sri Lankan hosts, the senior Czech army officer was heard issuing instructions to his junior officers. He spoke in Czech and nothing could be understood, but the departing hand shakes were warm and strong. We felt a sense of achievement.

³What we saw the next day was a stunning surprise beyond comprehension. When the team arrived early in the morning to commence technical inspections, twenty five of the best tanks chosen by the Sri Lanka team were meticulously lined up. It was later revealed that the tank yard had been moved around throughout the night to pullout the best tanks. Sri Lankan charm,

hospitality, persuasion and above all “Whiskey Diplomacy” seemed to have done the needful.



Czechoslovakian T-55 MBT⁴

The team inspected armament, communications equipment and automotive areas and examined vehicle documents prior to confirming acceptance. Discreet offers of additional Gold Leaf cigarettes to the young Czech soldiers assigned for fatigue work enabled many extra tools and accessories from other vehicles in the yard to be surreptitiously added to tank bins. The bins were overflowing with additional accessories. The team returned to Sri

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<http://www.diecast72.com/Pictures/HM/hg3310c.jpg>

Lanka leaving Lt Col Marambe, who quite willingly offered himself, to remain one additional month in Czechoslovakia and enjoy the Czech hospitality to supervise onward action.

A few weeks later the tanks had been moved by flat-bed rail cars from Czechoslovakia to the Baltic Sea port of Gdansk, Poland and loaded on board a massive Norwegian cargo vessel for the long sea voyage to South Asia – “Destination: Sri Lanka.”

There was unprecedented enthusiasm in the army about the arrival of tanks. The Armoured Corps in particular had the formidable task of reorganizing itself to receive tanks and integrate them. It was a challenge never experienced before. In late May 1991 Major General Waidyaratne, convened a priority meeting of senior armour officers to formulate policies concerning the integration of tanks into the

Armoured Corps. The meeting was convened at the Armoured Corps Training Centre, Kalattewa (near Anuradhapura). Brigadiers, Paranagama, Balaratnarajha, and Kalupahana were some of those present. Some very important decisions were made at the meeting. Tanks were to form a new unit designated 4th Armoured Regiment with handpicked officers and men. Command of the new regiment was a priority that drew prolonged debate and discussions among the senior officers. Some felt seniority should be the deciding factor, and suggested Lt Col Marambe. General Waidyaratne’s preferred me. He said, “My gut feeling is Sri should command the tank regiment.” Brigadier Kalupahana argued and convinced others that seniority should be the criteria.

Since Lt Col Marambe, had not returned from Czechoslovakia it was decided to seek his consent before

making the final decision. He arrived some weeks later and when inquired by the regimental commander, (surprisingly at the lunch table in Rock House Officers Mess in Colombo), whether he would like to command the new regiment, he declined. He said “Sri Lanka would do a better job.” The reasons for his declination after enjoying one additional month of East European hospitality were obvious. The prestige of raising and commanding the first tank regiment in the Sri Lanka Army was tempting, but the challenges and enormous responsibility that came along with it was daunting. Consequently, I was assigned command of the first ever tank regiment in Sri Lanka. A significant and historic decision was thus made at the lunch table at Rock House Camp Officers Mess.

There was great enthusiasm, interest, concern and some apprehension

about the introduction of battle tanks to Sri Lanka. Concerns were not confined to Sri Lanka. India was curious for strategic reasons. They were interested to find out what type of tanks and which country was providing them and whether they were military grants or purchases. They dug deep to find out whether there was third party involvement. Indian defense and intelligence representatives in Colombo began to make discreet inquiries about the tanks and special features built on them. Training packages provided were queried and countries offering training to Sri Lankan tank crews came under the Indian spot light. Pakistan being a friendly country that opted to train the tank crews became an issue for others.

Local concerns focused on who would retain authority for deploying tanks, where the tanks would be stationed, and last but not least, who was

going to be in command of a regiment of battle tanks. The sensitive nature of a tank regiment, both internally and externally was obvious. They are machines with enormous destructive power. General Ranatunga, Secretary Defense, gave explicit directions to the Army Commander, General Wanasinghe, that tanks should not be deployed or stationed south of Anuradhapura. They were to be strictly in operational areas only, and away from the seat of government and capital, Colombo. The ship transporting them was to be diverted to Galle, Hambantota, or the Eastern Port of Trincomalee. Tanks were not to be seen or deployed anywhere close to the nation's capital, Colombo.

General Ranatunga being a retired armour officer and a former Chief of Joint Operations Command, recognized the power and potential of

battle tanks. He was one of those strongly opposed to introduction of tanks to Sri Lanka. A tank gun, could be used on a potential enemy with devastating consequences but could also be turned to threaten others. The Generals obviously understood the concerns of civilian authority.

Battle tanks are tools of political and military power. Their presence and employment have domestic and external implications. Suspicions, concerns and apprehensions within the country and across the Palk Strait (India) were to be expected. History is replete with examples of how tanks have influenced national and regional politics, and military campaigns.

Tanks were first used in September 1915 in the Battle of Cambrai in France to break the deadlock of trench warfare. Tanks contributed to the rapid collapse of Axis Powers in World War

II. Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery's epic tank battles of El Alamein in North Africa turned the war in favor of Allied Forces during World War II. They defeated Field Marshall Erwin Rommels' "Afrika Korps" and dented Nazi Germany's southern flank. American General George S. Patton's tank – led U.S. Third Army raced across France to reach the heart of Nazi Germany despite a last ditch counter attack by SS Panzer Divisions in the Ardennes famously known as the "Battle of the Bulge." In August 1968 the world watched with shock and horror as Soviet tanks rolled into the Czechoslovak capital Prague, ending the country's desperate quest for reform and independence from the Soviet Union. Tanks of Communist Chinas' Peoples Liberation Army rolled into Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989 to crush a pro – democracy student uprising. In

1990, the world saw Iraqi tanks of the elite Republican Guard rolling into Kuwait city to occupy a sovereign state.

In March 2003, U.S. tanks rolled into Baghdad during "Operation Iraqi Freedom" to overthrow Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. More recently, in September 2006, Thailand's army took power with tanks rolling to occupy key positions in the capital, Bangkok, and in August 2008, Russian tanks rolled through breakaway South Ossetia in to Georgia. Each of these events has contributed to the mystic and myth of tanks and how a small number of them at the right place and time can have strategic level implications far beyond the expectations of inventors of the machine. Tanks are instruments of power, and coercion. They have a profound influence on internal and external politics of a nation. Once diplomacy fails and war is employed as

an extension of politics, battle tanks become decisive tools of the politician as well as the general.

The Transformation

On 24 September 1991, the Sri Lanka Army formally established the first tank regiment, designated 4th Armoured Regiment, Sri Lanka Armoured Corps with myself (Lt Col Sri Mudannayake) as its' first Commanding Officer. It was a historic moment for the Army and a monumental achievement for the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps. The long awaited 'Wheels to Tracks' transformation had finally begun.

The new regiment started in a makeshift temporary office in the building opposite the old guard room at Rock House Camp, Colombo. Officers and men were posted to the new unit from 1st and 3rd Reconnaissance Regiments. On 10 October 1991, the regiment moved out. The day also

marked the 42d Anniversary of the Sri Lanka Army. The future was unclear because the tanks had not arrived. They were on board a ship somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea heading towards the Indian Ocean. With uncertainty, and anxiety, fourteen officers and two hundred and eleven men moved eastwards to a new abode in Clappenburg, China Bay, Trincomalee.

Clappenburg – The Home of Tankers

The port city of Trincomalee was the main base and shore headquarters of Eastern Fleet, British Royal Navy during World War II. It is the second largest natural harbor in the world next to Sydney. On the recommendation of the then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the Supreme Allied Commander in South-East Asia Lord Earl Mountbatten shifted his headquarters to Kandy in August 1944, and Trincomalee was built as a fleet base

with buildings, jetties and sheds. The deep harbor entrance of Trincomalee was ideal for avoiding potential enemy sea mines. In December 1944 the Allied submarine fleet moved in. A huge 100 – tank oil storage facility and the Naval Dock Yard were developed during the period. Allied naval expeditions on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as on Burma were launched from Trincomalee. “Clappenburg” receives its’ name because it forms part of the

Clappenburg Bay in Trincomalee. The land mass curves into the southwestern edge of Trincomalee harbor where the Sri Lanka Air Force Base, China Bay lay adjacent to the camp. With a panoramic view of Koddigar Bay and the vast Bay of Bengal beyond, Clappenburg consists of more than a dozen aircraft hangars built in 1942 by the British Royal Air Force to support its Far Eastern Air Campaign.



Clappenburg Bay (Photo by author)

The hangars are solid structures constructed between two elongated ridges covered by natural jungle. The British did not disturb the natural cover and utilized the canopy to provide concealment from air. Nearly half a century later most of the buildings were in a dilapidated state and provided shelter for stray cattle and ubiquitous bats. The surrounding scrub jungle offered sanctuary to spotted deer and the dry under growth of thorny scrub offered cover to deadly Rattle Snakes. Some structures had been rehabilitated in the 1960s by the Food Department to be used as food storages. Following the communal riots of 1983,⁵ hundreds of internally displaced Tamil refugees were housed in four of the hangars with a small Sri Lanka Air Force detachment for protection.

⁵ These riots followed the killing of 13 Sri Lankan Army personnel by terrorists near Jaffna.

“WE NEVER WAVERED BECAUSE, IN THE LAST RESORT, WE WERE THE TANKERS OF 4th ARMOURED REGIMENT”

Training and Build-up amid

Challenges

Nurturing 4th Armoured Regiment was the most challenging and memorable experience of my military career. I had to be patient with my demanding superiors and firmly persuasive with the subordinates. The confidence placed in me had to be honored but I could not compromise my principles and time tested military traditions. I had a responsibility to the nation, the army, to my superiors, and above all to the officers and men placed under my command. It was a huge challenge, a daunting task and a responsibility that demanded every bit of my character, leadership and twenty year military experience.

I had a highly dedicated team officers and men but none had the

knowledge or expertise on tracked vehicles, neither did I. But, there was a responsibility to take these men and machines to battle. The men had to be mentally and physically conditioned, and tactically and technically trained to face the demands of fighting with battle tanks. A tank is an instrument of war that places great demand on human endurance and skill. My challenge was to successfully merge a man with a machine so that both could fight and survive in battle.⁶

But, other challenges were looming in the horizon like a developing thunderstorm.

On a humid late afternoon, on 10 October 1991 the officers and soldiers of 4 Armoured Regiment arrived in Clappenburg. They did not have the

⁶ At this point Sri Lanka had been at war for eight years against the Tamil Tigers (LTTE).

good fortune of coming to a well established camp. What welcomed them was a cattle occupied, mosquito and rattle snake infested, abandoned aircraft hangar complex left over from World War II. The officers occupied a generator house, and senior non commissioned officers and soldiers used two hangers for living accommodation. None of the buildings had windows or doors as they had been removed by Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF)⁷ troops earlier. Cooking and dining were done under trees. The Air Force guard room was converted to a temporary headquarters with borrowed furniture from nearby camps with 4th Armoured Regiment's beginning at Clappenburg, Trincomalee, reminiscent of early English settlers moving to North America in the sixteenth century.

⁷ The Indian Peace Keeping Force had come to Sri Lanka in 1987 and peaked at strength near 80,000. Over 1200 were killed in action and the force withdrew in 1990.

A survey carried out a few weeks before moving to Clappenburg revealed the shocking state of the regiment's future home. It was used as a Tamil refugee camp with heaps of rubbish and an unbearable smell of human excreta. There was no water or electricity and the men were to share a few toilets – a ratio of 1:30. The regiment arrived in hired public buses with one jeep, a truck and a single high frequency base station for communications. A few cooking utensils with other basic necessities were the only items available. I vividly recollect the expression on my men's faces as they arrived in CPB. It was a mixture of doubt, despair and disappointment. The men looked at the young officers and they in turn looked at me, but I had no one standing behind me to look up to except the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean.

It was a challenge thrown at me and I had to face it. At that moment I realized why there weren't much choices or takers to become the commanding officer of the most prestigious regiment to be of the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps.

On that 10th day of October 1991, standing in front of 14 officers and 200 men, I felt lonely, and realized what it meant to be the father of the first ever tank regiment. A sense of fear gripped me, but I concealed it from the men standing in front of me.

Later that night, alone in my room, I wrote these words in my diary "The concerned but hopeful expression seen on the faces of my officers and men

drives me to stand up to the challenge. I have a moral obligation to them. Anxiety and fear is now gone and I must "Serve to Lead."

[End of Part I](#)

[The story of the newly formed 4th Armour Regiment continues with the arrival of the tanks and equipment. The men and officers take on the challenge of new equipment training and developing the tactics and procedures for employment in combat.](#)

[Part II Arrival of the Tanks and the Beginning of Training](#)

4th Armoured Regiment – The Pioneer Tankers

The Officers and men had barely dropped their baggage, when information came from Colombo that a ship carrying twenty-five main battle tanks (MBTs), 2 armoured recovery vehicles (ARV) and twenty four 40 – and 20 – foot containers were arriving the next day. The movement of the vessel was kept secret for security reasons. A Norwegian registered vessel named Pauwgracht, reportedly carrying classified cargo, entered Sri Lanka territorial waters in the Laccadive Sea early 9 October and rendezvoused with two Sri Lanka Navy, Dvora Fast Attack Craft. It was escorted round the southern coast to Trincomalee and arrived at the Prima Jetty⁸ at 1930 hrs on 11 October 1991.

⁸ Prima Ceylon Limited is a Wheat milling and Bakery concern established in 1977. The plant has a milling capacity of 3600 metric tons of



The Prima Jetty Trincomalee, where the Tanks were unloaded. (Photo by author)

The Defense Ministry had sought permission from Prima to berth the ship but had not discussed usage of its cranes for the unloading operation. After discussion and persuasion, Prima agreed to allow usage of their cranes to unload the equipment.

Unloading commenced early the next day and twenty-four containers were transported on borrowed low-bed

wheat per day. The complex includes its own wharf and unloading equipment.

trailers to camp. They contained tank ammunition, first-line spares, and ancillary equipment. The officers and men were tired at the end of the day and had to retire to a camp with little water, poor sanitary conditions, sparsely illuminated shelter and broken cement floor to sleep. Tanks and ARVs were in the lowest cargo hold of the ship covered under a consignment of granite and paper rolls consigned to Japan. One wondered whether it was a smuggling operation. Perhaps it was. It remains a mystery to this day as to how twenty-seven former Warsaw Pact armoured vehicles arrived in a conflict-ridden Asian country without international outcry.



Arrival of T 55 MBTs to Sri Lanka in late 1991 from Czech Republic. This opened another chapter in the history of the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps.⁹

There was lot of speculation as to how the ship sailed through territorial waters of many nations with a consignment of battle tanks when International Maritime Law requires declaration of cargo carried on board vessels sailing through such waters. The Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and United States kept close surveillance on post Cold-War arms exports from former Warsaw Pact countries to conflict-ridden third world countries. The international

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http://www.armouredcorps.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=122%3Aour-old-memories&catid=25&Itemid=9

community did not want the massive stockpiles of former Warsaw Pact armaments to proliferate in third world nations embroiled in conflict. Despite surveillance and international laws controlling movement of weapons, the consignment reached Sri Lanka without incident or perhaps the knowledge of the rest of the world.

There were other intriguing questions and controversies concerning the purchase of T-55 tanks, but they ought to remain in memories and diaries.

History was created when the first battle tank was placed on solid ground at 1742 hours on 12 October 1991. Major Milinda Peiris, a Driving & Maintenance course graduate from the Indian Army school in Ahmednagar could drive competently. He maneuvered the tanks out of the jetty and brought them to the Prima carriageway. The Commanding Officer

and Major BA Perera commenced driving the tanks to camp around midnight. Later Major Peiris joined to drive the remaining tanks and by late evening 13 October, twenty four hrs after the unloading commenced, all equipment and vehicles were at Clappenburg. The operation continued throughout the night. Civilians living along the road from Prima Jetty to China Bay hearing the rumbling of tanks in the middle of the night peeped with a mixture of fear and anxiety wondering whether the Indian Peacekeeping Force was returning. We waved at them to show it was their own nations' armour that was moving. It was a moment of great pride and achievement for the pioneers of 4th Armoured Regiment.

The T-55 Main Battle Tank (MBT)

The Russian designed MBT was the most prolific contemporary battle tank of the T- Series at the time and was

reportedly used in twenty-three countries. It is a medium battle tank weighing 45 tons. The main armament is a 100 millimeter gun, firing high explosive (HE), high explosive anti tank (HEAT) and high explosive squash head (HESH) ammunition. Secondary armament includes, a co-axially mounted 7.62 machine gun that could be used as a spotter, and a turret cupola mounted 12.7 millimeter anti-aircraft heavy machine gun firing armour piercing (AP), armour piercing

incendiary (API), tracer, and standard ball ammunition. On the turret are two banks of multi barreled smoke discharger units. The engine generated smoke protection is another unique feature of the T Series battle tanks. The four member crew consists of the commander, loader, gunner and driver.

The Fighting compartment is cramped and crew fatigue is a major challenge. But, overall it is a troop friendly easy to master battle tank.



<http://www.dakkadakka.com/dakkaforum/posts/list/250219.page>

In the weeks that followed there were streams of visitors to Clappenburg, mostly VIPs, politicians accompanied by family, ranking military officers, and civilians. They were awed at the sight of impressively lined-up T-55 MBTs and ARVs. One senior officer quipped that the war could be finished in three months with the acquisition of tanks, I respectfully kept mum. For our visitors

it was pleasure, photos and leisure, but for the tankers it was sweat and smoke, dust and dirt.



The Commander of the Army Lieutenant General LDCE Waidyaratne along with Major General GH De Silva inspects a newly arrived MBT. Brigadier PA Karunatileke Commander Armoured Brigade is in black overall. Other two Officers on the tank are Officer Commanding 'A' Squadron Major MP Peiris and Officer Commanding 'B' Squadron Major BA Perera. Commanding Officer of 4 Armoured Regiment Lieutenant Colonel CSNB Mudannayake is at right extreme.¹⁰

A fortnight later a five – member Czech team arrived with an Englishman to formally hand over the equipment to the Sri Lanka Army and provide introductory training. They were mandated to do the job in four weeks and depart. The team comprised of Mr. Pokorny of Omnipol Company, Colonel Gustav Safr, Head of Czech Tank Department, Colonel Tan Vitko gunnery expert, Colonel Jiri David tank driving specialist, Colonels Oldfich Tesik and Major Milan Chalupa, driving and maintenance specialists; and Mr. Glyn Kay, a Britisher of Almavel Company.

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http://www.armouredcorps.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=122%3Aour-old-memories&catid=25&Itemid=9

The team completed the equipment handover and commenced basic training¹¹.

Merging Men and Machines

Tanks are sophisticated equipment, and it was not easy to train soldiers to master them in a few weeks. Ironically, authorities in Colombo expected this to be done and often questioned, why the tanks were not ready for operational deployment. I did not respond. The Czechs strongly discouraged the idea of deploying tanks without adequate individual, crew, and collective training. The drivers quickly acquired basic skills and could drive the tanks in less than two weeks. The Czechs mentioned that it took over six weeks to train Egyptian tank drivers to start up and move a tank. Tactical driver

¹¹ Omnipol a.s. has been authorized since the early 1990s to export military equipment for the Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia). There is a long history of Czech transfer of armoured vehicles to interested nations. The Almavel Company was an Indian owned concern based in Uganda.

training was both time consuming and exhaustive.

Physical and mental conditioning of tank crews was a necessity and had to be done gradually and with lot of caution. Tanks are heavy, noisy iron monsters needing competent handling, regular maintenance, and resupply. Main armament ammunition is bulky and heavy, so is machine gun ammunition. Gun components and mechanical gear need strong hands to handle them. Track link replacement and bogey wheel change is a human nightmare. These machines were designed for strong Europeans with a large body frames. Small made, less strong Asians found it extremely difficult to cope with the demands. Consequently, tank crews had to develop muscular strength through regular physical training and provided with good nutrition – an issue that I

regularly discussed with my quarter master.

Additionally, tank crews had to be mentally conditioned to fight for prolonged periods in confined, cramped conditions. The pitching, rolling and yawing movements of a tank coupled with noise, dust, smoke, and sulfur fumes cause rapid crew fatigue. Dehydration sets in quickly and tank crews have to constantly maintain adequate body fluids to prevent loss of concentration and alertness. Slightest loss of concentration by any crew member could cause serious injury or death to themselves or others. Physical conditioning through regular, rigorous PT and gradual exposure to fatigue and prolonged movement in tanks across rough terrain enabled crews to mentally and physically condition themselves. It had to be done gradually, cautiously and under close supervision. Crew

conditioning was an area that drew regular attention of the command team.

A tank crew needs mutual understanding and harmonization of crew drills. It had to be practiced and drilled repeatedly until the crew understood each other by instinct. A tank troop of two tanks and a squadron of three tank troops had to do the same. A strong sense of camaraderie and mutual interdependence had to be achieved before impending operational deployment. One simple way to do it off duty was to bunker them together, and that was done. The tank crews were bedded together, and as much as possible Sabre Troops and the Squadron were kept together. Inter squadron and inter troop sports competitions, drama contests, and Field Miniature Range shooting contests were encouraged to develop unity, pride and camaraderie.



First shoot of T 55 MBTs in November 1991 at Trincomalee.¹²

Weapons, including main armament firing, were done at a makeshift firing range in Villankulam, close to Monkey Bridge Camp despite strong opposition by Czech trainers for safety reasons. A main armament high explosive shot fired at maximum range from Villankulam could go as far as the Trincomalee–Anuradhapura road endangering our own detachments in Morawewa and Pankulama areas.

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http://www.armouredcorps.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=122%3Aour-old-memories&catid=25&Itemid=9

Realizing the need to train crews, and having no directions from Colombo concerning dangerous and sensitive issues, decisions were made by the command team to conduct task-oriented training as realistically as possible.

Firing on the move or fire and movement drills were not done due to extreme danger and movement restrictions. Basic troop battle drills were conducted in an open ground adjacent to Monkey Bridge Camp, but squadron movements were confined to sand model.

While basic training was progressing, instructions were received to deploy tanks for operations by early December 1991. I disagreed on the grounds that crews were not adequately trained and troop leaders lacked experience to command tank troops in combat. These concerns were conveyed in a detailed and lengthy letter addressed

to Regimental Headquarters, Colombo, with recommendations for advance training before undertaking operational duties. My letter created unexpected anger in the higher echelons of the Army and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and I was immediately summoned to Colombo. The feeling in Colombo was that the Commanding Officer had not only resisted deploying tanks but had gone a step further and asked for more training prior to deployment. In the military it was tantamount to insubordination.

I was directed to report to General Waidyaratne, the Army Commander. He was furious at the start, but gave a patient and concerned hearing when I explained the complexities of individual training, marrying up tank crews, tank commander training, and progressing to collective troop and squadron training. None of which had

been done at the time. I was directed to meet the Secretary Defense, General Ranatunga, accompanied by Regimental Commander Brigadier Paranagama. I was placed on the cross-hairs, criticized and questioned at length for seeking more training time and for writing a controversial letter. I argued politely and cautiously but did not compromise the need for more training prior to deployment.

For the first time in my military career I was confronting three of my former 1st Recce Regiment Commanding Officers – General Cyril Ranatunga, General Cycil Waidyaratne, and Brigadier Tilak Paranagama under whose guidance I learnt the finer points of officering in the Armoured Corps. They were my mentors, but on that fateful day I had to face the wrath of three Generals who grilled me to the core. They would have been under

strong Government pressure to deploy tanks on operations as early as possible. After strong reasoning and much persuasion, a three month advanced training package was authorized. At one point under intense pressure I respectfully offered to step down as commanding officer unless my recommendations were accepted. These senior officers who were my one time mentors would have realized that I was standing up for my convictions in the interest of the regiment and the men I commanded and was not mitigating for personal gain. They knew the higher picture.

After investing a colossal sum of money to procure tanks, the Government was simply not willing to commit additionally money. I argued on the point that the entire investment would be lost if untrained troops with unfamiliar equipment were launched into battle.

Yet, despite my strong objections, I was directed to deploy one tank troop in Jaffna by late December 91. I returned to Trincomalee and directed the Czech instructors to accelerate the training for the troop earmarked for deployment.

In mid-December 1991, Major Rohan Jayasinghe joined the regiment as Second in Command after graduating from Malaysian Staff College. The Squadron Commanders were Major

Ananda Wimalaweerea, Officer Commanding Headquarter Squadron; Major Milinda Peiris, A Squadron; Major BA Perera, B Squadron; and Major Ajith Ratnayake, C Squadron. Captain (QM) S Araniel was quarter master. These outstanding officers were the founding pillars of 4th Armoured Regiment.

“LOYALTY TO A FINE REGIMENT MAY TAKE HOLD OF A MAN AND STIFFEN HIS RESOLVE” - LORD MORAN, THE ANATOMY OF COURAGE

The Light Aid Detachment under Captain Chandima Gunaratne and Lieutenant Yakandawela along with the best available vehicle mechanics, electricians and armament technicians of Sri Lanka Electrical Mechanical Engineers (SLEME) kept the tanks

rolling and were an indispensable part of the regiment. Other functional back up elements such as Sri Lanka Service Corps (SLASC) set up a fuel point at Clappenburg, and Sri Lanka Army Medical Corps (SLAMC) provided a medical orderly with basic medicine.

In late December 1991 after six weeks of basic introductory training, the first troop of tanks was sea lifted by Sri Lanka Navy Landing Craft Medium (LCM) to Jaffna. It was an intricate operation since both tank crews and LCM crew had no prior experience of loading battle tanks on to an LCM. The Czech trainers who did not approve of this early sea movement watched with shock and awe as drivers maneuvered tanks along a precipitous ridgeline in Clappenburg Bay and loaded them on to the LCM. Despite lack of training or previous experience the operation was completed successfully. The Czechs later complimented the Sri Lankan crews for their amazing aptitude and felt confident that the regiment would do well.

The Czechs departed after completing the initial training package.

By this time the officers had acquired some knowledge and experience to conduct basic courses on driving, gunnery, radio, and live firing training for the tank crews. A jungle area adjacent to the camp was chosen as a tank driving area with improved natural obstacles for vertical climbing, ditch crossing and maneuver training. A sign posted marking the driving area read “Tankodrome,” a word borrowed from the Czech tank vocabulary. Basic troop maneuvers, harbor drills, and night training were conducted in a teak plantation opposite Trincomalee Monkey Bridge camp.

SLEME personnel along with tank crews were trained on towing drills, tank component changes and other recovery drills utilizing the complex but extremely versatile ARVs. Training was not without accidents. A troop leader lost part of a finger due to incorrect

loading of the main armament. Another had his ear partially torn by keeping the head too close to the recoiling breach block. Recovery operations were the riskiest with steel cables dangerously tensed pulling up tanks from ditches and obstacles. Anything and everything in a tank could become a finger snapper, bone crusher or even cause death if improperly handled. Crews had to be constantly reminded of the inherent dangers. We did not have fatalities due to very strict observance of safety measures.

Meanwhile, development and beautification of the camp continued with construction teams from 4 Volunteer Sri Lanka Engineer Regiment refurbishing the hangars as living billets and redesigning the generator house to be the officer mess. Trees were planted and landscaping was done to beautify the land which was dry and arid. Forty and

twenty foot containers that brought ammunition, ancillary equipment and tank spares were converted to be a makeshift Main Guard Room, Quarter Master Stores, armoury, and ammunition stores. It was heartening to see a dilapidated World War II hangar complex gradually transforming itself to a respectable habitat of a tank regiment. The commitments of the pioneering young officers, non commissioned officers and troopers who trained six days of the week and worked on Sunday to develop the camp bear testimony to the stunning beauty of Clappenburg Camp today.

The Regimental Police (RP) Section, usually entrusted with maintaining good order and discipline in the camp was given the extra responsibility of beautifying the camp and maintaining essential services. Being the policemen of the first tank

regiment they were adorned with a special uniform with a black cross belt and shining brass buckles, an innovation of Major Rohan Jayasinghe, the second in command, who possessed an aesthetic eye. Besides the usual policing duties, RPs were trained on plumbing, electrical repairs and basic masonry by the Army Engineering Service Regiment through necessity. Clappenburg was an isolated camp with meager resources and had to be self contained as much as possible. – ‘Necessity is the Mother of Invention’

A Czech training team of fifteen military and civilian specialists arrived late January 1992 to conduct the much awaited three-month advanced tank course. Training commenced immediately and progressed well with officers and men mastering the equipment. Night firing with Infra Red systems, advance driver gunnery and maintenance training were done.

Floating targets at 2000 meters out at sea were successfully used to train gunners on long range engagement of targets. While local training progressed four officers and forty enlisted men left to the School of Armour, Naushera, Pakistan, for four weeks of T-55 training.

The regiment received a warning order for operational deployment by early April 92’, and consequently, the training program was modified to meet the directive. With return of Pakistan trained crews late February, troops and squadrons were reorganized and regrouped with permanent tank crews. With additional men being posted spare crews were trained and provided to squadrons.

Under normal circumstances an armoured regiment is structured and equipped based on its’ tactical role. The role and tasks determine the equipment. In this case it had to be worked in the

reverse order. We received twenty five MBTs and had to structure an organization to fit the tanks. Consequently, three squadrons each with eight tanks were created. Each squadron had three troops of two tanks, and a Squadron Headquarter of two tanks for the Officer Commanding and Second In Command. The twenty fifth tank was to be the Regimental Headquarters Command Tank. The ad hoc structure though adopted with some skepticism seem to work satisfactorily with troop leaders confidently handling two tanks in close quarter battles alongside

infantry units. It seemed effective, but had to be developed further.

Combat deployment soon followed and the 4th Armoured Regiment lent its steel and blood to the nation's defense. For the next seventeen years the regiment wrote a new chapter in the modern history of the use of armour in counterinsurgency operations. They contributed immeasurably to the ultimate victory over the Tamil Tigers and the liberation of the Sri Lankan people from their reign of terror.

Brigadier C S N B Mudannayake RWP USP psc was born on 21st February 1949. He was educated at Kingswood College Kandy. He joined the Sri Lanka Army as an Officer Cadet in July 1971 and on



Commissioning was posted to the 1st Reconnaissance Regiment, Sri Lanka Armoured Corps on 14th October 1972. He received his officer Cadet training at the officer Training school, Madras, India and Army Training Centre Diyaiyalawa where he won the sword of Honor awarded to the best officer Cadet. He attended the Company Commander's Course in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Bangladesh Command and General Staff College. He raised and commanded the 4th Armoured Regiment of the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps. He has held many important and prestigious appointments in the Sri Lanka Army. He retired from service as a Brigadier.