

Mystery and intrigue around 'Iris Moana' (1995, September 03). The Island.

MYSTERY AND INTRIGUE AROUND 'IRIS MOANA'

By Our Defence Correspondent

The 136 passengers and eight-member crew were all aboard the ferry 'Iris Moana' by 5.30 p.m. on Monday, August 28. They were journeying back to their homes on the government-held islands off the Jaffna Peninsula.

Shortly after 6 p.m., the 80 ton ferry moved slowly out of Trincomalee harbour and headed north up the coast.

Chartered for 1,700 dollars a day by the Commissioner-General of Essential Services (CGES), which provides food, medicine, and transport for civilians in the war-torn north, the 'Iris Moana' was operated by Neucoco Shipping of Colombo.

Apart from its captain, Loyola Fernando, there were seven other crewmen, many of them former navy sailors. Four of the crew were Tamils while the others were Sinhalese.

Although the 'Iris Moana' could carry 200 passengers, it had only 144 on board that day. They included 15 children under the age of seven years, 83 men and 58 women, all of them Tamils.

About 50 people were on their way to Nainativu, while some 40 were going to Anulativu, and 15 each to Kayts, Eluvaitivu and Pungudutivu. They had bought their tickets for the trip from the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), which helps the forces control the island.

The journey on the 'Iris Moana' is never a comfortable one, but it was the only way these people could travel to and from the islands, so they tried to settle down and make the most of their trip. They were scheduled to reach the Karainagar navy base on Karaitivu island at 5 a.m. on Tuesday.

The ferry was not escorted. The navy didn't believe that the LTTE would attack a ship full of Tamils. The ship itself was not worth stealing. If it was stolen, its large size would make it vulnerable to attacks by the navy and air force.

Practically the only thing worth stealing on the ship, apart from engine parts and navigational equipment, was a powerful radio set.

But shortly before midnight, the ferry passed Mullaitivu, and no sooner had they begun to steam up the long stretch of coast held by the LTTE, the Tigers struck.

It is still not clear exactly how the Sea Tigers hijacked the ferry. It would have been simple enough for them to go up to it in their fast lifeboats and force it to come to a halt by firing a burst of machine gun fire at or near it, or even verbally hailing it.

However it was done, there was no warning for the crew to stop it, and they apparently did not even have time, or did not try, to send out a distress signal. Perhaps they felt that the Tigers would not harm them, since they had not done so in many years. Before coming to Trincomalee to take up the service to the islands, the 'Iris Moana' had been doing the same service between Kappitiya and Mannar, and had not had any trouble there either.

What the Tigers did with the ship between midnight and noon on Tuesday is not yet clear. Since the ship had been stopped right next to a Sea Tiger base on the coast, the LTTE could have removed whatever they wanted, including perhaps the passengers.

Meanwhile, the army's directorate of military intelligence had sent a warning to the navy that there were indications that an LTTE ship would begin unloading weapons for the Tigers somewhere near Mullaitivu on Tuesday.

The navy's eastern commander, Commodore Daya Sandarajah, immediately dispatched three of his vessels to search for the weapons ship, which he wasn't known was fictitious.

The navy's largest warship, the offshore patrol vessel 'SLNS Jayasagara', (P-601), was available, and this was sent to the area, along with two small gunboats, known as 'fast attack craft', the Dvora type P-458 and the Super Dvora P-463.

With two 25 millimetre guns, and two 14.5 millimetre guns, the 330 ton Jayasagara would be more than a match for any weapons ship, and with their high speed and armament of two 127 mm guns, could catch any fleeing LTTE vessel.

The three warships spread out along the Mullaitivu coast at dawn, and began their search.

At 1:15 p.m., P-463 spotted the 'Iris Moana' anchored 1.5 miles from the beach, and radioed to the other two navy vessels that it had discovered a suspicious ship. Jayasagara and P-456 quickly headed towards that direction, and the eastern command room at Trincomalee was informed.

Meanwhile, P-483's captain, Lieutenant Nam Wijesinghe, not knowing that the ship he had found was the 'Iris Moana', headed towards it.

As the Super-Dvora came close to the ship, its crew would surely have seen the name 'Iris Moana' painted on the front and back of the hull, even if they had not recognised the ship which they had seen in Trincomalee and along the northeastern coast dozens of times before.

It appears that the navy men didn't see any Sea Tiger boats around the ferry until the last moment, since P-463 never sent a message warning of an explosion.

But at 1:40 p.m., sailors on board Jayasagara and P-456, which were fast approaching the area, saw an explosion and saw flames shooting up from P-463. Within minutes, it had sunk.

It is not known what caused the explosion. The most likely explanation appears to be that there was an explosion on board the 'Iris Moana' or LTTE craft.

Another cause could have been a suicide attack using explosives, or the unlikely possibility of the LTTE having acquired surface to surface missiles.

The gunboat's crew were obviously taken unaware, since they did not make any move to flee the area, and they were unable to destroy any Sea Tiger craft.

As the Jayasagara and P-456 came closer, the sailors saw more than a dozen Sea Tiger boats moving to and from the shore and the 'Iris Moana'. Some of the LTTE craft appeared to be pulling bodies of sailors from the sea.

The captains of the Jayasagara and P-456 quickly realised that the ship was the 'Iris Moana', but could not tell whether it had been hijacked or not. They immediately called for reinforcements for survivors.

The air force said they had destroyed two missile launching pads on the beach that evening.

Artillery guns at the nearby army camp also opened fire, but this too appears to have been very erratic, and no Tigers were killed by it.

At about 5:30 p.m., the end firing at the Sea Tiger boats with every gun they had.

was time to act. With less than an hour of daylight left, it was imperative that a proper search be mounted immediately for survivors of P-463, which had sunk by now, with only a small part above the water.

But the presence of the 'Iris Moana' presented a major problem. All efforts to contact its captain over the radio had failed, and by now it was obvious that the Tigers had seized the ship.

It was decided that the heavy guns of the two Chinese gunboats could not be used in such a situation, for fear of killing civilians, and Jayasagara was too slow and valuable to be risked against so many LTTE boats, and would be a sitting duck for an LTTE suicide boat. It was a sister ship to the 'Sagarawardena', which was sunk last September off Mannar.

Although they were far outnumbered by at least 15 Sea Tiger boats, the four Dvora's were moved into positions of the battle starting up again, at 5:40 p.m., horrified sailors on the other boats saw a huge explosion on P-456, and the Dvora's engines stopped, bringing it to a complete halt.

Soldiers watching the battle from their camp nearby say they saw a flash of fire from the beach at the time of the explosion. It is now believed that the Tigers brought the Czech built T-55 main battle tank they got away with, and which hasn't been seen since, down to Mullaitivu, and camouflaged it on the beach. The gun on the tank is believed to have been the weapon used to cripple P-456.

Immediately, the two largest Sea Tiger craft, which were quickly recognized by the other two Dvora's of the five smaller patrol craft (IPC) which the Tigers also captured during the Pooneryn battle, attacked the Dvora.

Although their boat was stopped dead in the water, and they would have known that their time had come, the sailors on board P-456 fought to the end, firing at the Sea Tiger boats with every gun they had.

Their efforts were of no avail, for although one IPC was sunk by their gunfire, the other managed to come in close, and supported by the other Sea Tiger boats, literally cut the Dvora into pieces with their gunfire.

As darkness fell, the other navy vessels withdrew to a safe distance, unsure of what had hit either one of the sunken gunboats, and still unclear of where the 'Iris Moana's passengers were.

There was also the possibility that the ferry with its 144 civilians aboard would be attacked by the Tigers to avenge the deaths of the 144 people, which would be a suicide mission against the navy's largest base.

Throughout the night, the navy boats kept watch, staying more than five miles away. At dawn they clearly saw Sea Tiger boats moving to and from the 'Iris Moana' and the shore, with LTTE cadres embarking and disembarking from the ferry.

Air force helicopters and soldiers from the nearby camp, also kept watch.

At 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, the soldiers reported that the ferry had begun steaming away from the shore, towards the open sea, and the navy breathlessly waited to see which way the 'Iris Moana' would go.

However, it soon became obvious that it was a false alarm, and that the ferry was still in the same place. Meanwhile, in Colombo, few people in the forces' top brass seemed to know what was really going on.

The Joint Operations Command curtly told journalists that the ferry had sent no message about the battle, so as far as it was concerned, nothing had happened.

Brigadier Sarah Mundasinghe, the military's official spokesman, tried to put a picture of a great victory by telling the weekly cabinet press briefing that two large LTTE boats carrying 30 Tigers each had been destroyed by P-456, together with eight smaller Sea Tiger boats.

It is highly unlikely that the LTTE's big boats, which are used to carry cadres, and not to fight, would have stayed around when four Dvora's were attacking them.

Officers on the other Dvora's confirmed that only the single IPC was sunk, contrary to Mundasinghe's claim.

All this only added to the general confusion among the forces and the public.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday afternoon, the Commissioner-General of Essential Services, M. N. Jayaratne, who is also the secretary of the ministry of shipping, ports, reconstruction and rehabilitation, sent a letter to Marco Alther, the head of the ICRC in Colombo, asking for help in locating the civilians.

The ICRC immediately sent a message to Jaffna, telling its representative there to ask the LTTE what had become of the 144 people on board. He got an immediate reply from the Tigers.

However, the LTTE offered to turn five bodies of sailors, and on Thursday morning the ICRC handed them over to the army at Karaitivu, where they were brought to Colombo.

They were identified as the bodies of Lt. Nalin Wijesinghe, Leading Mechanic U. K. D. Senaka, Able Seaman D. W. H. W. K. Nissanka, Able Seaman L. A. P. K. Perera, all of Super-Dvora P-463, and Able Seaman P. Y. U. S. Viharana of Dvora P-456.

Fourteen other navy personnel are still listed as missing. They are Sub-Lt. M. T. H. W. Kumaratunga, Leading Seaman K. K. Dharmasiri, Able Seaman H. N. L. Herath, Leading Seaman U. J. K. Hemant, Able Seaman H. W. R. P. Kumara, Able Seaman T. G. Chandana, Communicator K. K. Karunaratne, and Leading Mechanic K. K. F. Nandana of P-456.

The Tigers also told the ICRC on Wednesday that they had

taken no prisoners. On Thursday Jumaid sent a second letter to the ICRC.

"Your esteemed cooperation in obtaining information and the release of the passengers, the crew and the vessel will be very much appreciated," he said.

The ICRC promptly dispatched one of its representatives to Mullaitivu by road to talk to the Tigers at the scene, where the tense standoff between the navy and the Sea Tigers was continuing.

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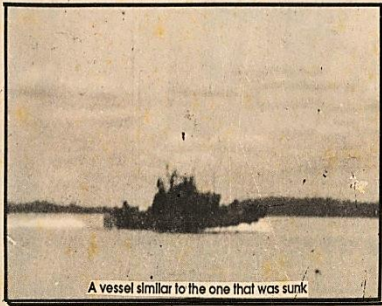
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A vessel similar to the one that was sunk

With an army base only four kilometres away, why didn't the soldiers launch a fast operation to advance towards the beach close to 'Iris Moana'? Apart from ineffective firing artillery rounds, the soldiers appear to have done nothing but watch.

Any movement towards the beach would have forced the Tigers to flee into the jungle or risk fighting on land and sea at the same time in broad daylight. By taking control of the beach near the ship, the forces would have surrounded it and the LTTE's battle tank would have had to move away or be attacked by ground troops.

Had the tank had to flee, P-456 may have been destroyed. Even if the Mullaitivu camp did not have enough frontline troops for such an advance, there was more than enough daylight on Tuesday to fly in crack troops such as the air mobile brigade or the Special Forces, who are less than half an hour's flying time away by helicopter.

Even after the soldiers had spotted a battle tank on the beach, the army did not seem to have even though it was something the Tigers had never seen from the army at Pooneryn. Why was it that the overall operations commander, Maj. Gen. Daluwatte, did not organize such an expedition? He was at Trincomalee, from which the navy was directing its operations, and therefore, from which the navy would have had the most information on the needed about the battle. Instead, on Tuesday morning, he returned to his headquarters at Anuradhapura, and took no offensive moves. The air force too, just as the navy, did nothing to help the three armed forces has been sadly lacking a situation which had not arisen before. On Tuesday, the navy was left to fight its own battle, with no effective help from the army and air force.

If the armed forces intend to each fight their own separate little war and not help each other out, the navy will just end up getting their Eelam.