

Bloodiest defeat of LTTE. (1995, October 08). *The Island*.

Bloodiest defeat of LTTE

By Our Defence Correspondent

The night of Monday, October 2, 1995, was the bloodiest defeat for the LTTE in the long and brutal history of Sri Lanka's civil war.

The Tigers launched two carefully prepared major operations that night, one on land in the Jaffna Peninsula, and the other on the high seas off Mullaitivu.

When dawn broke on Tuesday, at least two hundred and fifteen Tigers were dead, and both attacks had turned into shattering defeats.

In the Jaffna Peninsula, a minimum of 175 LTTE cadres died, most of them [Censored] by artillery, mortar and heavy machine gun fire.

At sea, at least eight Sea Tiger boats were sunk, with more than 30 of their crew being killed.

Victory did not come lightly for the army and the navy that night. Thirty-two army personnel were killed in the land battle, and a further 15 soldiers and four sailors were killed at sea.

Even more seriously one of the navy's largest landing craft, the "Rana Gaja," was [Censored] damaged, [Censored]

The week did not start off well for the armed forces. Operation Thunder Strike began at dawn on Sunday, October 1, with a massive artillery and mortar barrage from the Vasavilan side of the

Palali military base. As shells rained down on the LTTE-held Achchuveli area, three brigades of troops, comprising a little more than five thousand soldiers, moved forward.

Censored

Unexpectedly, unlike in past operations by the army in the Jaffna Peninsula, the Tigers did not pull back in the face of the barrage, but stood and fought.

By mid-morning, Tiger reinforcements had been brought up from the Jaffna area, along the Jaffna-Point Pedro road, and resistance stiffened further.

But with increased artillery and mortar fire and the use of Czech and Chinese built medium battle tanks, together with air strikes by F-7 jets and Pucara ground attack aircraft, the soldiers managed to advance.

By mid-afternoon, the troops of Operation Thunder Strike were nearly three kilometres to the east and southeast from the Palali forward defence lines.

However, when the operation stopped that night, it was found [Censored] soldiers had been killed, [Censored] others wounded. Troops had recovered 19 bodies of dead Tiger cadres.

The high number of wounded caused a serious problem for the ground commanders. It was realised that the advance would have to be temporarily suspended, until re-

placements could be brought in.

There was also the problem of conducting a thorough search of the newly captured area of about 25 square kilometres (about nine square miles) for Tiger cadres who might have been bypassed in the advance, and could be hiding, waiting their chance to attack.

Throughout Monday, the troops consolidated the area, which included the long-abandoned town of Achchuveli and the towns of Thoppu, Navakerri, Puthur and Pathamenni.

About 35 civilians, most of them old and feeble people who had been unable to flee the fighting, were found to be within the newly captured area. However, Tiger radio said that about 85,000 people had fled the area when the fighting began and moved to refugee camps, schools, kovils and churches further south.

The Voice Of The Tigers also said that 26 civilians had been killed by the army's shelling, and dozens more who were wounded had been sent to the Jaffna hospital.

The LTTE had not counter-attacked throughout the daylight hours of Monday, choosing instead to bring up hundreds of cadres from the southern areas of the peninsula to strengthen its forces.

But at 2 a.m. on Tuesday morning, the classic time for the LTTE's mass attacks on army camps and police stations, more than a thousand Tiger cadres attacked the troops of Operation Thunder Strike.

[Censored]

Dozens of parachute flares were instantly fired into the air by the troops, illuminating the battlefield brilliantly.

Well dug-in troops, who had used all of Monday to prepare proper defences for the inevitable Tiger counter-attack, sent out a hail of machine gun, rocket-propelled grenade and mortar fire to meet the attacking Tigers, who were led, as always, by their women's brigade.

Meanwhile, Palali's heavy artillery guns also opened up, firing on predetermined areas directly in front of the soldiers, from where the Tigers were attacking.

The Tiger attacks came on two fronts, one near the towns of Ponnalai, Kadduwan and Navakerri, and the other in the Puthur West area.

Fierce fighting continued until dawn, and then the Tigers withdrew, having been unable to breach the soldiers' defences.

That morning, troops recovered and counted [Censored] bodies of Tigers, most of them with their weapons. It is estimated that at least a hundred more would have been killed and carried away by their comrades.

Over 200 Tigers are believed to have been wounded.

One officer and [Censored] soldiers were killed in the night's battle, three of whom succumbed to their wounds after being airlifted to Colombo. [Censored]

others were wounded. Among the LTTE dead were three lieutenant colonels, including Lt. Col. Lucia, the Jaffna area women's leader who had led the LTTE women into the attack.

Later, a press release from the Tigers' London office admitted that 150 of their cadres had been killed in the battle.

On Tuesday evening itself, 118 bodies of Tigers were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) at Madagal, on the western side of the Palali base.

Surprisingly, 120 of the [Censored] bodies found were those of men, although the Tiger women's brigade had been in the forefront of the battle.

For the rest of the week, the troops of Operation Thunder Strike stayed in their new positions, waiting for the Tigers to continue their counter-attacks. The troops did not move forward from the positions taken on Sunday, although the Joint Operations Command kept on insisting that "the operation was continuing."

The Tigers did attack again on Tuesday night, killing five soldiers, and losing at least three of their own cadres, but this too was beaten back.

While Operation Thunder Strike was taking counterstage, another dramatic battle took place at sea off Mullaitivu on Monday night.

[Censored] They were carrying more

than 400 soldiers who were going home on leave after serving many hard and dangerous months in the Jaffna Peninsula.

The [Censored] escorted by [Censored] gunboats and [Censored] Dvora Fast Attack Craft.

At 8.40 p.m., when the convoy of vessels was 14 miles off the coast of Mullaitivu, the gunboats' radars detected more than 20 Sea Tiger boats racing towards them from the shore.

The gunboats and fast attack craft opened fire and for more than five hours, a ferocious battle raged.

The Sea Tigers were striving to get at the slow and vulnerable lightly armed LCMs, which are the lifeblood of the tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors at Palali, Pooneryn, Elephant Pass, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Karainagar, Kayts, Mandaitivu, and many other isolated army and navy bases.

The LTTE knows that sinking even one or two of the LCMs will force the government to give up the planned major offensive in the north for many months.

They almost succeeded.

One Sea Tiger suicide boat loaded with explosives made straight for Rana Gaja at high speed. It was hit by gunfire and blew up in a fiery explosion only yards away from

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the stern of the LCM.

[Censored]

[Censored]

[Censored]

The gunboats and fast attack craft swiftly came to Rana Gaja's rescue, surrounding the LCM and furiously fighting back with their heavy guns.

The LCMs also kept up a steady fire from their own five-zero machine guns, and even some of the 154 soldiers on board Rana Gaja fired their personal small arms at the Sea Tigers.

Finally, the Sea Tigers broke off the attack, and raced back towards shore, but the Dvoras and gunboats pursued them, firing until the LTTE craft came within the protective range of Tiger guns on the shore.

Due to the fact that the battle was fought entirely in the darkness, it is not known exactly how many Sea Tiger boats were sunk, or how many of their cadres died. But at least eight boats are believed to have been destroyed.

Since Sea Tiger boats usually carry a crew of four, and suicide boats a crew of two, it is believed that at least 30 Tigers would have died.

Sadly, despite their gallant fight, 15 soldiers and four sailors on Rana Gaja were killed. Another 52 soldiers and 10 sailors were wounded.

A Dvora also sustained some slight damage.

[Censored]

Meanwhile, the local salvage firm Master Divers on Tuesday pinpointed the exact location of the wreckage of the Antonov AN-32A air force plane which crashed off Negombo in bad weather on September 13 with 75 military personnel on board.

The plane is in 4,500 feet of water, 37 kilometres from the coast.

Master Divers has made an offer to the Air Force to recover the plane, and the Defence Ministry is considering whether it would be worth the enormous cost of salvaging.