
Book Reviews

Ours Not to Reason Why: With the IPKF in Sri Lanka

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Following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord on July 29, 1987, India embarks on a peace-keeping mission in Sri Lanka to facilitate the implementation of the accord. On October 09, 1987, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a breach of peace, turns on its mentors, the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF). This results in severe fighting of a conventional nature between the two sides. By the end of October, the IPKF rids the Jaffna peninsula, in the Northern Province, of the LTTE. Thereafter, it secures the Eastern Province. The Sri Lanka Army is a non-participant: sidelined, a silent spectator, secure and ‘sulking’ in its camps. The LTTE, bruised but unbowed, clandestinely regroups in a redoubtable bastion in the jungles in the southeastern portion of the Northern Province.

It is here, in the Vanni, and more particularly the district of Mullaittivu that 7 Infantry Brigade of 4 Infantry Division of the IPKF finds itself in December 1987. *Ours Not to Reason Why: With the IPKF in Sri Lanka* is their story, warts and all, over the next two years, as told to us by their Commander, Brig RR Palsokar. He terms it the “most challenging” phase of his life.

This is a story of success and failure; of elation and despair; of courage and cowardice; of professionalism and the lack of it. Above all, it is the story of the remarkable resilience, endurance, commitment and sense of duty of the Indian soldier in battle.

Ravi Palsokar empathises with his command: his fondness for his ‘Garhwalis’ – he had three fine battalions serve under him – is apparent. Critical of the higher command, there is not a trace of malice or ill will in the book. He is self-effacing, concerned and analytical. He writes with remarkable clarity, honesty and sense of purpose. Despite the unfair hand fate deals him, he bears no grudges.

The book has 12 chapters, all in logical sequence. To the reader unfamiliar with the politico-military aspects of India’s intervention in Sri Lanka, I would recommend reading “The Layman’s Guide to the Tamil-Sinhala Conflict” at the Appendix and the excellent foreword by Brig Vivek Sapatnekar before moving any further.

In the opening chapter, the author is severe on the disorganised induction of his formation; bemoans the poor standards of training of the infantry; and is unhappy with the lack of clarity in his tasking. As a first step, he deems it necessary to relocate his headquarters and position himself near one of his isolated units, virtually, in the tiger’s lair. In Chapter II, he analyses the LTTE. He acknowledges their superb commitment and iron discipline; exceptional fighting qualities; and skill in the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide attacks. He explains how the local Tamil population views the LTTE with a mixture of “admiration, fear and helplessness” and refers to the surreal situation where the foe finds “succour in our country” (Tamil Nadu) even as they engage the Indian Army in combat on the island. Chapters III and IV describe the formation’s attempts to get to grips with the environment and their efforts to improve the standards of training on the job. Chapters V and VI describe the conduct of major operations to search and clear the jungles of suspected LTTE bases. The latter chapter also includes a brief

analysis of the performance of various “arms”. Chapter VII describes continued fighting in the jungle and refers to the operations of Special Forces often placed under the command of the author. Chapter VIII helps reset the backdrop in the continuously evolving politico-military situation in Sri Lanka. In Chapter IX, the author recounts the less than fortunate initiation of one of his new units – 6/8 GR—into battle in the unforgiving jungle and how the unit quickly recovers its equilibrium. Chapter X is devoted to logistical matters and the final ‘pull-out’ of the IPKF and the inglorious homecoming: a sad commentary on our political leaders and people. In virtually the last chapter, the author reflects on the operations in Sri Lanka. He spiritedly responds to the unfair criticism of the conduct of his formation.

Finally, to the question, the author asks, and leaves unanswered: “Did the IPKF fail in its task?” I would unhesitatingly say, ‘No.’ The fact that a grateful Sri Lanka graciously erected, of its own free will, a war memorial to commemorate the Indian fighting man killed in action on Sri Lankan shores in Operation Pawan is proof enough.

The book brings out several ‘lessons learnt’; however, not all are that new in perspective. The key takeaways are:

- Expeditionary intervention operations are intensely complex. They involve the three Services and various arms of the civil government. They invariably have to be launched quickly. They demand that special civil-military structures, organisations, procedures, knowledge and skills including language are properly in place.
- One of the foremost responsibilities of a senior military commander is to ensure that one’s command is prepared mentally, physically and logistically for the task. Notwithstanding the constraints of time, the ‘approach to battle’ – reconnaissance, logistical preparation, preparatory training, planning, concentration and familiarisation – must be sound. For a commander to be stampeded into an operation for which he is not adequately prepared is to fail his command.

- Commanders and staffs must remember that the cohesion of a formation and even more so a unit in battle is vital. Added numbers do not necessarily mean greater effectiveness. A unit with four integral sub-units is invariably more effective than a unit with six assorted sub-units.
- The infantry (and armour and mechanised infantry) needs time and opportunity to train repeatedly under its unit and sub-unit commanders to continuously improve their individual, group and sub-unit fighting skills and techniques. These objectives cannot be achieved through the medium of training competitions and formation exercises.
- Realisation must dawn on formation commanders and staffs that in war (indeed, in peace, too) they are on the same side as their units! Their task is to facilitate and find ways to assist their units in accomplishing assigned tasks NOT to simply find fault and criticise.

Throughout the book, anecdotes, examples and quotes by participants enliven the narrative. The book is remarkably free of error. However, the binding is of poor quality – the book tends to fall apart easily. Also, a few maps and extra sketches, particularly of the major operations, would have added value.

This is a book that should be discussed as a case study on senior command (and leadership) courses of instruction for budding formation commanders.

Ours Not to Reason Why is a poignant tale. Brig RR Palsokar is an Infantryman and Guardsman to boot. A second generation officer with an impeccable record of service, he enjoys an enviable professional reputation amongst his peers. His leaving the Service prematurely was a loss to the Army but understandable under the circumstances.

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