

Sri Lanka's Alan Warnes looks at the Mi-24
Hinds of the Sri Lanka Air Force

Devil's Chariots



WHEN THE Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) acquired its first Mi-24V *Hinds* in November 1995, the Sri Lankan Government finally proved it was taking the Tamil Tigers as a serious military threat. Until then, the SLAF appeared to be intent on merely sparring with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was fighting for a Tamil Homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Before 1995 the SLAF had relied upon Siai-Marchetti SF260W Warriors and Argentine-built IA-58 Pucaras to provide Army troops with much-needed close air support (CAS). When the Tigers started using Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) in April 1995, the Eelam War took a new twist. Five Pucaras were purchased from Argentina

between 1992 and 1994, but a couple had crashed and the remainder suffered from a lack of spares, corrosion and any credible self-protection system. The shooting down of one on July 14, 1995 was a real blow to the morale of the Sri Lanka Army's ground troops, who had been depending upon the SLAF's new close air support aircraft to crush defences as they pushed into enemy territory. At the same time, the Bell 212 helicopter, utilised for its utility role and fire support missions, was resorting to low flying tactics to evade SAM attacks. The stark reality was the SLAF desperately needed an aircraft that could fly low and deliver the effective firepower needed to support the ground troops. Enter the Mi-24 *Hind*. Just seven months before the *Hinds'* arrival, the

SLAF had lost two HS 748s, a Y-8 and a Pucara to the Tigers' SAMs (see *Surface Air Missiles – the SLAF's Darkest Hours*, June 2009, p56). The pilots of the Pucaras and Warriors did not have the cunning or firepower to thwart this new threat, but the Mi-24V crews could unleash some ferocious weaponry as well as adapting new electronic warfare tactics taught overseas.

Enter the Mi-24V

In mid-1995, the SLAF's Air Cdre Lal Pereira, Director of Air Engineering, headed a team to Konotop in the Ukraine to evaluate the fearsome *Hind*. The highly impressive gunship had been at the forefront of the Warsaw Pact's Cold War CAS tactics as well as fighting in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s and Chechnya in the 1990s. The SLAF knew it could be the answer. Initially, it was agreed to wet-lease three Mi-24Vs



Above: **The first Mi-24/35 to be delivered was this example, CH-610 along with two other Mi-24Vs, CH-611 and CH-612. Within a couple of days of being declared operational in November 1995, the *Hinds* were unleashing their deadly firepower upon the Tamil Tigers for the first time.**

Top: **Flying close to the jungle canopy is an armed Mi-35P. This more modern version of the *Hind* started being delivered to the SLAF in mid-1998, some three years after the first three Mi-24Vs entered service with 9 Sqn. This aircraft was lost on November 27, 2009, claiming the lives of all four on board including the squadron's only QHI at the time, Sqn Ldr (posthumously promoted to Wg Cdr) Esala Dodanmaluwa.**

and these were subsequently air-freighted to Sri Lanka inside an An-124 *Condor* on November 4, 1995. Less than two weeks later, on November 16 after completion of flight testing and amidst

an air of great expectancy, a pair deployed to their new home at the newly renovated Hingurakgoda-Minneriya, an old Second World War RAF base situated just below the Frontier

Defence Line that had split the Tamil Tiger-held areas from the Government supported south.

The following day both Mi-24s were dispatched to the forward operating base at Palali in Jaffna to support ground troops on the peninsula and within hours they were being called into action.

A SLAF Shaanxi Y-8 (a Chinese-built An-12) was shot down on November 18 while on approach to Palali by a flotilla of enemy boats and all but one of the four aircrew on board were lost. Immediately, both Mi-24Vs were scrambled to track down the fleeing boats and destroy them along with their landing platform at Thondamannar. In the thick of the battle one co-pilot's windshield took a direct hit from a 12.7mm shell, but there were no casualties. This was the Mi-24's first engagement in Sri Lanka's northern theatre. The *Hinds* had arrived.

From then on, two of these formidable ▶