

gunships flew a stream of attack missions in support of troops to play their part in liberating the Jaffna Peninsula during Operation Rivirasa. However, battle damage became a major factor as the gunships brought the battle to the Tigers – the first major incident occurred on November 19 when CH-612 was hit by enemy fire, causing serious problems to its hydraulic system, resulting in a landing gear failure. Immediately the third helicopter positioned at SLAF Base Katunayake was flown to Palali and paired missions recommenced. As a result of this, the SLAF High Command recognised the need for more than just three Mi-24Vs if such a high operational tempo was to be maintained, so the green light was given for the acquisition of more.

On November 24, 1995, with a lull in the fighting, No 9 Squadron eventually found time to stand up with its five pilots and 26 engineers at Hingurakgoda-Minneriya. Due to the high operational tempo the gunships were being flown by a mix of Ukrainian and Sri Lankan pilots, but whenever a training mission could be squeezed in, the Ukrainian crews got on with qualifying more SLAF personnel.

SLAF pilots were eager to provide much needed support to their Army colleagues, who in 1995 were fighting a ferocious ground war. They usually took about 18 hours to convert from a Bell 212, going solo after about five. However, the biggest hurdle facing the squadron's nine pilots when the author visited Hingurakgoda-Minneriya in March 1996 was trying to understand the *Hind* manuals, which were all in Russian, as were the



Above: An Mi-24V comes into land after a test flight by the Aircraft Engineering Wing at Katunayake in February 1996. Undoubtedly it had been repaired after some battle damage.

Below: This Mi-35P was one of the first two delivered in July 1998. It is seen here outside the hangar the unit was sharing with 7 Squadron at Hingurakgoda-Minneriya in early 1999. The big Sri Lanka flag emblazoned on the hangar is evidence of the personnel's fierce patriotism. Note the Mi-35P is armed with four rocket pods as well as the 12.7mm Gatling gun in the nose.



audio warnings.

From the front seat of the cockpit the co-pilot has a panoramic view of the world around him – it is his job to operate the armament systems, while the Command pilot concentrates on the flying, although he can fire the aircraft's cannon when required. Behind them in a fairly cramped cabin are two gunners, one on each side – the

two gunners often attracted most of the enemy gunfire, and were in a dangerous position as it is very difficult to escape should the helicopter crash.

By mid-March 1996 all three Mi-24Vs had flown about 180 hours in SLAF service and with nine pilots fully proficient, the Ukrainians wound down their combat missions to concentrate on flying training. They played a massive part in teaching the SLAF Mi-24 tactics and combat employment and with their work completed, they left by 2000. The three original Mi-24Vs were air freighted back to the Ukraine in December 1998 having provided the SLAF with the knowledge and airmanship that would induce them to eventually acquire another 23 Mi-24/35s.

### Toughest Times

Unlike the rest of the aircraft deployed to the war zone, no Mi-24s were fitted with Electronic Automatic Self Protection Systems until 2000. During the five years they had been in service, the three original Mi-24Vs flew an amazing 1,405 combat missions without any countermeasures against a pretty lively SAM threat. It is not surprising that between 1997 and 2000, 9 Sqn lost a lot of men. Seven helicopters were lost, while nine pilots and eleven air-gunners paid the ultimate sacrifice. While every fatality was deeply



Above: No 9 Sqn technicians and engineers take a break to pose for the camera in February 1999.

Below: All three leased Mi-24Vs sit on the ramp at Hingurakgoda-Minneriya in early 1996. Of the 26 Mi-24/35s that have been flown by the SLAF, there are two main variants; the Mi-24V and Mi-35P. The original three were the earlier Mi-24V with a 12.7mm Gatling gun mounted at the front, which were bolstered through the purchase of another four Vs before the Mi-24Ps (which the SLAF refer to as Mi-35Ps) and newer Mi-35Ps arrived, with the 30mm gun running alongside the starboard side of its fuselage. Due to the two types being used, the SLAF refer to the whole fleet as Mi-24/35s.



Above: The gunner's position – note the Kevlar protection on the seats.

Below: A close up of the 80/57mm rocket pod and a 23mm gun pod that SLAF aircrew used during the war.



felt by the unit, the lowest point came on October 23, 2000, when the Commanding Officer, Wg Cdr Jagath Rodrigo, was killed while flying the oldest Mi-24V, CH-613. He had headed the Mi-24/35 Force since the gunship was introduced into service and was held in deep affection by all of his colleagues, not just because he led from the front but because he was considered a real gentleman.

He had told AFM in February 1998 of the aircraft's lack of countermeasures systems: "We have an infrared jammer, but we do not know the frequencies of the SAM-7 or SAM-14s that we believe they are using. Attempts are being made to acquire a system in the open market to counter the missiles." Unfortunately for Wg Cdr Rodrigo and his co-pilot, along with the two gunners, it was such a missile that claimed their lives.

### Roles

Over the 14 years that the Mi-24/35 fought the Tigers, the gunship was involved in a number of roles. Not too surprisingly, it was CAS that took up the bulk of the missions – providing the ground troops the ability to reach their objectives after the enemy had been routed by the devastating fire power of the *Hind*.

Despite its slow speed and limited manoeuvrability, the Mi-24/35s were utilised in air interdiction missions as well as CAS to destroy, disrupt, neutralize or delay the enemy's military potential. During the time when the SLAF had no night air interdiction capability, the *Hind* was called upon to use its Night Observation and Target Acquisition System. It was no surprise that the Tigers referred to the gunships as the 'Devil's Chariot'.

There were also Maritime Air Operations when the squadron would work with the Sri Lanka Navy to destroy enemy craft. Armed Escort missions would see the *Hinds* used to protect transport helicopters and VVIP helicopter formations. Mi-17s carrying logistics to the important strategic army bases at Elephant Pass and

Mi-24/35 Losses			
Date	Aircraft	Incident	Crew Status
March 17, 1997	CH-614	Went missing in Mullative Sea	Cap – F/O Malalasekara (missing), Co – Major Wowa (missing), Cpl Nandasena, Armourer (missing), LAC Liyanage, Armourer (missing), LAC Samarakoon (Gunner), LAC Arunashantha (Gunner)
Nov 10, 1997	CH-619	Crash landed on Kokilai Lagoon after Missile attack	Cap - F/O DT Gunasekara KIA, Co – S/L Kaluarachchi KIA
A Qualified Helicopter Instructor, Sqn Ldr Thilina Kaluarachchi was the first Mi-24 instructor. The two gunners survived the crash.			
June 26, 1998	CH-620	Suspected missile Attack	Cap – F/O Kodithuwakku KIA, Co- F/O Authique KIA, LAC Vitharana (Gunner) KIA, LAC Perera (Gunner) KIA
Dec 17, 1999	CH-618	Shot down, EPS	Cap – S/L Silvapulle KIA, Co-pilot – De Zoysa KIA, Cpl Athulatheja (Gunner) KIA, LAC Thushara (Gunner) KIA
May 24, 2000	CH-624	Shot down Meesalai	Both pilots survived, Cap – F/L VB Edirisinghe, Co – F/O TN Deen, Cpl Perera (Gunner) KIA, LAC Dissanayake (Gunner) KIA
Oct 19, 2000	CH-627	Shot down Nagarkovil	All crew survived, Cap F/O Piyarathna, Co – F/O Rajapaksha, LAC Bandara (Gunner) KIA
Oct 23, 2000	CH-613	Missile Attack	W/C Rodrigo (CO) KIA, Co – F/L Wijesekera KIA, Cpl Siriwardana (Gunner) KIA, Cpl Wickramasinghe (Gunner) KIA
Nov 27, 2009	SAH-4412 (ex CH-635)	Crashed in Buttala	Wg Cdr Esala Dodanmaluwa KIA, Sqn Ldr Rehan Fernando KIA, Cpl Sirisena KIA, Cpl BMS Xhandrawansa KIA
<b>Note:</b> Gunner LAC Nishantha suffered a fatal injury on October 5, 1997 during an attack in the Vavuniya area. The helicopter (CH-618) survived until December 17, 1999.			

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When the Tigers started to use aircraft to attack in 2005, the Mi-24/35s fitted with their new Day/Night Observation System integrated with their 23mm guns became an ideal platform to counter the new threat; *Hinds* become a major part in the SLAF's Air Defence Operation Plan.

### Major Ops

The Mi-24/35s fulfilled many differing roles and were involved in most, if not all, the major offensives against the Tamil Tigers. Operation Rivirasa ran from October 17, 1995 to May 26, 1996. Its aim was to regain control of the Jaffna Peninsula and establish a safe corridor to the south.

Three Mi-24Vs operated from Palali and added a new dimension to the war by delivering a devastating blow to the LTTE, creating chaos among its forward elements and acting as a deterrent in the years to come. When the government forces retook Jaffna on December 5, 1995, 9 Sqn flew its gunships over the city with the national flag underneath; just three helicopters had flown 280 hours on 72 missions.

One of the biggest battles during the Sri Lanka conflict took place at Mullativu Army camp during the night of July 17, 1996. The resident No 25 Brigade, comprising some 1,400 personnel, was subjected to an attack by around 4,000 Tigers backed by heavy machine gun and mortar ▶



Above: This fully armed Mi-24V, with a gunner on alert, flies low over a lagoon during February 2009. The war was drawing to a conclusion but the Mi-24/35s were still very much involved.

Below: An Mi-35P from 9 Attack Helicopter Squadron on the ramp at Anuradhapura on February 8, 2011. The SLAF adopted a new serial system in 2009 adding a more specific type designation - all helicopters are now prefixed 'SAH' as shown here by SAH-4404. ARNOLD TEN PAS/AVIATION

