

fire. An attempt to seize the same facility a few years earlier had been repulsed. Knowing what a strategic impact seizure of the camp would have on the war, the Tamil Tigers had returned.

With only three helicopters on strength, 9 Sqn were tasked on July 18 to get to Palali. In the early hours of the morning the first two helicopters left and were soon over the camp. After identifying friendly forces, the gunships flew low and engaged targets on the outskirts of the camp, clearing out the enemy with wave after wave of attacks in between landing for refuelling and re-arming.

In a bid to reinforce the camp, using SLAF helicopters and naval vessels was finalised – the helicopters would insert Special Forces, while Navy landing craft escorted by the Mi-24/35s carried infantry troops. Two Mi-24s subsequently got airborne from China Bay at around 1530 escorting five Mi-17s and two Bell 212s. However, as the helicopter formation approached the landing position, a T-55 tank that the Tamil Tiger had captured at Pooneryn in November 1993 was positioned at the northern tip of Mullativu Camp, and opened fire on the aircraft and navy boats. SLAF Kfirs were called in to sanitize the landing zone (LZ) just before the helicopters approached.

Because the Kfirs' Time Over Target (TOT) was delayed by ten minutes and the helicopters did not want to wait for them in case it compromised the element of surprise, the two Mi-24s went ahead with neutralizing the LZ and escorted the troop-helicopters in for landing. During the assault, 9 Sqn attacked and destroyed heavily laden enemy boats that were streaming in to attack the unarmed transport helicopters. For six days the Mi-24s escorted helicopters carrying troops and munitions into the LZ – in nearly every mission the helicopters sustained heavy battle damage and the ground crews had to work hard to ensure they were available for the next mission. Against heavy opposition, 9 Sqn had displayed the courage and determination that would stand them in good stead until the war ended in 2009.

Operation Jayasikuru, was one of the longest that the Mi-24s participated in (running from May 13, 1997 to December 2, 1998) and Mi-24 CH-615 recorded the highest number of bullet strikes ever sustained by the unit – 34 holes, shredding 220 wire looms. Such was the magnitude of the Mi-24's work that the squadron flew 222 combat missions over 590 hours, but it took a heavy toll as six pilots and four air gunners were lost.



Above: A SLAF Hind jinks over typical Sri Lanka terrain during February 2009 as a sister ship looks on.

By 2001 all the helicopters had been fitted with self-protection systems as well as a Forward Looking Infra Red (FLIR) system that was particularly helpful at night in the absence of any night vision goggle capability.

After a long ceasefire from February 2002 until July 2006, a large scale battle broke out as the LTTE attacked the Muhamali Frontier Defence Line in August 2006. Once again the Tigers were trying to regain control of the Jaffna Peninsula, but this time from several launching pads. With hundreds of LTTE personnel ousting Navy troops off the south of Kytes Island, on August 12 Mi-24/35s were called in to attack boats that were bringing in reinforcements. Four days later, another pair of Mi-24/35s was called in to repulse another large attack by LTTE cadres.


The Mi-24/35s played a huge part in the closing phase of the war and were involved in many daring missions. During November 2008 two of the gunships escorted a Bell 212 deep into enemy territory to pick up a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) of around eight

soldiers that had taken casualties and were hiding out in the jungle. Taking off at last light, the three helicopters were shepherded by a Beech 200 that had left SLAF Base Anuradhapura. The Beech kept its sensors firmly locked on to the ground to find the patrol and to watch for any enemy movement. Often the gunships were flying below the jungle canopy in a bid to ensure no SAMs could lock on to them. "It is our job to help our colleagues on the ground whenever we can" one Mi-24/35 pilot told *AFM*.

As the war drew to a conclusion there were around ten operational Mi-24/35s equally split across five bases: Anuradhapura, Jaffna, Katunayake, Vavuniya and Hingurakgoda-Minneriya. In early January 2009 with the LTTE now fighting for its life, one Mi-24/35 was struck by ten rounds which caused a heavy fuel leak forcing it to land just south of Iranamada in an area controlled by the Tamil Tigers. A technical crew was ferried to the site and hastily patched up the fuel leak, allowing the battered gunship to limp back to base.

### Recognition

In March 2010 No 9 Attack Helicopter Squadron was awarded the President's Colours in recognition of the fighting spirit that the personnel had displayed in 15 years of operations. It also provided a chance for everyone to openly recognise, after the war had ended in May 2009, those who displayed little regard for their own life in attempting to help colleagues on the ground.

Today No 9 Attack Helicopter Squadron operates four Mi-35P *Hind-F* and one Mi-24V *Hind-E* helicopters. 



Above: A 9 Sqn Hind crew, with whom the author flew: from left to right LAC Dissanayake (gunner), Cpl Peiris (gunner), Flt Lt Sameera (co-pilot) and Flt Lt Amal Wahid (captain).

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