

The SLAF's bomb-truck! The days of 12 Sqn MiG-27M operations in Sri Lanka are numbered with the war now coming to a close and the need for 'wide area - wide blast' bombing now a thing of the past.



Blue Horizon UAVs are being very effective too and can stay up for 4-6 hours and are as good as the Searcher that we have been using, although those are bigger and stay up for eight hours."

Record Flying Hours

It was against this backdrop that the SLAF had a considerable increase in their flying hours during December 2008, when the operational tempo was gathering momentum against a retreating LTTE. In November the SLAF had flown around 1,553 hours, which by December had increased to 1,983 flying hours and by January had gone up again to 2,326 hours - 1,184 hours on fixed wing including UAVs and 1,142 hours on helicopters.

For many months the 7 Sqn Bell 212s were flying more hours than any other unit due primarily to their CASEVAC role, which led to them evacuating

importance of joint operations, by sending them on courses in India, Pakistan and the UK.

Air Vice Marshal (AVM) Kolitha A Gunatilleke, Director Air Ops highlighted this when he told me: "Up until 2002, the four or five Army divisions would attack the LTTE from different directions without any real dialogue involving the SLAF. Today they are attacking one area, we are then inserting SLAF Regiment to hold on to it before the Army move on towards another area and hit that."

"During 2002-05 we concentrated our training on joint operations so when war did break out again in 2006, each service knew what was expected from them. The jet squadrons trained on their targeting while the helicopters were upgraded with better self-protection systems.

"In 2002-05 we carried out a lot of training to master our equipment, this involved more recce work with UAVs and Beechcraft 200s. The LTTE exposed themselves during those years - and we were able to determine all their important sites right under their noses! They complained that we were flying over their territory but the air space is ours! When war did break out we knew exactly where everything was including their ammunition dumps.

"So we sent in MiG-27s, Kfirs and Mi-24/35s with the UAVs providing much of the recce. We had purchased Kfir C7s in 2000/01 that had a better Weapons Delivery Navigation System (WDNS). The Kfir missions are more targeted - with their more accurate systems we can use them for pinpoint bombings on lorries, cars, buildings etc. The MiG-27s are great for big blasts in big areas. The



Above: Until the arrival of the Hind the gunship role was occupied by the Bell 212s, acquired in the mid-80s. Many aircrews have been lost over the years and one Bell 212 has been rebuilt three times due to serious mishaps. Today, 7 Sqn is the busiest unit in the SLAF carrying out a casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) role as well as some very daring rescue missions guided by Mi-24/35s.

Below: While the fighters deal with strategic bombing and air-to-air, the important role of close air support has been fulfilled by the 9 Sqn Mi-24/35 Hinds since 1995. Such a dangerous role, has taken its toll on the unit with seven Hinds lost to date claiming 18 lives while another four are missing in action. The CO, Wg Cdr Rodrigo, was killed in October 2000 along with his co-pilot and two gunners when his helicopter was hit by a missile. Fortunately, the Hind's electronic warfare system has been upgraded since then and no more personnel have been lost.



Air Marshal WDRMJ Goonetilleke RWP & Bar, VSV, USP, ndc, psc, Commander, SLAF



The SLAF Commander, Air Marshal Goonetilleke, followed in his late father's footsteps when he became Chief on June 12, 2006.

Air Marshal WDRMJ Goonetilleke was appointed as the 12th Commander of the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) on June 12, 2006, following in the footsteps of his father, the late Air Chief Marshal Harry Goonetilleke who commanded from November 1976 to April 1981.

The SLAF runs through the veins of the family because the current Chief's brother, Group Captain Shirantha Goonetilleke, served the SLAF but was sadly killed in the HS 748 that crashed

on April 29, 1994. Air Marshal Goonetilleke joined the SLAF as an Officer Cadet in the General Duties Pilot Branch on January 13, 1978 and upon the successful completion of his flying training, was commissioned in the rank of Pilot Officer on August 14, 1979. During his 31-year career he has held a number of command, operational and administrative appointments. He logged many flying hours both in fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft when serving as an operational pilot as well as the Commanding Officer of No. 3 Maritime Squadron & No. 4 Helicopter Wing. Vital operational experience gained in his career up to then had earned him senior operational command appointments thereafter as the Zonal Commander in both Northern Zone and Eastern Zone on two separate occasions. He commanded the Air

Force bases at Katunayake, Anuradhapura and China Bay as well. Air Marshal Goonetilleke served as the Director Operations/Deputy Chief of Staff Operations of the Air Force before being appointed as the Chief of Staff on 01 April 2006. He graduated from the Air Command and Staff College, Air University, Alabama, USA in 1994 and attended the prestigious National Defence College in Pakistan in 2001.

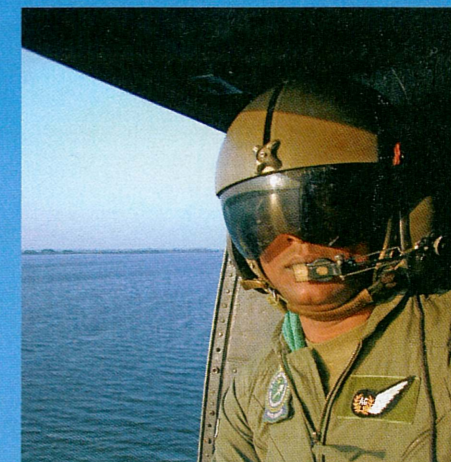
In recognition of his distinguished service career, he has been awarded with the 'Vishista Seva Vibhooshanaya' and 'Uttama Seva Padakkama.' For the bravery displayed in conducting operations, he has been awarded with the Gallantry Medal 'Rana Wikrama Padakkama' twice. Air Marshal Goonetilleke, is married to Mrs. Nelun Goonatilleke. They have a son and a daughter, Rehan and Ronali.

The need for a good air-to-air interceptor led the SLAF to acquire four F-7GS in 2007. For this role the double-delta winged F-7GS, flown by 5 Sqn, is equipped with Chinese PL-5E air-to-air missiles. They have been involved in several skirmishes with the Tamil Tigers Air Wing Zlin 143s, with one being shot down by a F-7GS in September 2009.



injured soldiers and civilians that had been caught up in the battles. However in January, 6 Sqn and its Mi-17s beat all squadron flying records for recent years, by recording 354 hours transporting troops into different locations - not bad when you consider that the total was split between six crews. One pilot, a Flt Lt who was OC, Flying Training with 6 Sqn, flew a massive 119 hours that month because of a lack of available personnel. When you consider that much of this was done in the dark, without night vision goggles (NVGs) you get an idea on how skilled the SLAF pilots are. The SLAF do not use NVGs in any of their aircraft, much to the dismay of US personnel who were recently in Sri Lanka for training purposes - not to train the Sri Lankans but to be trained by the Sri Lankans. According to one SLAF helicopter pilot: "One US pilot was explaining that for some operations it would be best to operate at 3,500 feet with your night vision goggles on. But when we told him 'we don't use night vision goggles and we fly at 50 feet in that role' he responded with 'you guys are mad - I can't teach you anything'. So we ended up showing him our methods we use in our war." These days much of the flights involve the rescue of civilians. On April 20, SLAF helicopters were flying in to the so called 'no-fire' zone where Army troops were not allowed to fire, to airlift fleeing civilian injured, according to locals, by LTTE gunfire. Despite the risks involved, the helicopters landed in the no-fire zone at around 4 pm to evacuate nearly 200 severely injured civilians to the Vavuniya and Anuradhapura hospitals for immediate treatment.

Not having NVGs mean that the helicopter pilots learn to recognise the landmarks and lights as they fly their routes. SLAF aircrews have regularly risked their lives for Navy and Army colleagues, whom they often know personally. Pilots fly helicopters at night into army camps and other government facilities to pick up soldiers under siege or to drop off much needed food. There are many stories of bravery within the SLAF that have never been told, but once the conflict is over, these tales



Two air gunners sit either side of the helicopter ready to fire at the enemy should the need arise. The Bell 212 air gunner is probably one of the most dangerous jobs in the world - even with the aid of body armour, it is still a very risky way to earn a living! Sadly several air gunners the author has met over the years are no longer with us.

India's Vietnam

When the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) tried to disarm all the various military groups as a prelude to peace, it soon got dragged into a battle with the LTTE. The Indian Army found out to its cost - around 1200 lives during 1987-1990 - just how vicious the war was. In one battle, the heads of Indian soldiers were severed and stuck on poles along the road to Jaffna. While the Indian Air Force may have flown around 70,000 sorties mainly with Mi-8 Hips, Mi-25 Hinds and An 32 Clines during the 32 month period, with no losses, it is generally agreed that Operation Pawana was ill-conceived and that the Indian Army was ill-prepared for such a conflict and it became India's own 'Vietnam'. Once the Indians left, the SLAF realised it would have to play a bigger role in the fight against the LTTE, in providing Close Air Support to the Army.



In recent months, the evacuation of injured civilians in the northeast of the island has led to 7 Sqn Bell 212s flying around the clock. Here civilian casualties are dropped off at Anuradhapura for transfer to a local hospital.