The Man Behind The NAVAL STRATEGY – VICE ADMIRAL WASANTHA KARANNAGODA



Today’s wars are fought on multiple fronts – ground, sea and air. Sri Lanka is an island thus its entire coast signifies the international boundary of the country as well as being its Forward Defence Line. It is the first point of attack from all external

forces including but not limited to the LTTE Sea Tigers. Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda is the strength behind the current successes of the Navy. His strategic direction enabled the Navy to destroy the ‘Floating Warehouses’ of the LTTE. The sea is Vice Admiral Karannagoda’s ‘territory’ and what follows is his story on the determination, perseverance and courage of the Naval forces and how the Navy has progressed from a ceremonial outfit to one of the best Navies in the region.

By Malinda Seneviratne
Photography By Sanka Sammana

Could you describe the situation when you assumed duties as Navy Commander?

This was the time when the Ceasefire Agreement with the LTTE was in force. It remained in force even after President Mahinda Rajapaksa assumed office. As everyone knows, the LTTE began attacking military targets. Earlier they had been targeting intelligence operatives. They attacked security personnel, both on land and at sea, the latter in the guise of fishermen.
The Government, however, chose to keep the option of negotiations open and the LTTE was repeatedly invited for talks. In February 2006, the LTTE finally agreed to come to the negotiating table. Talks were held in Geneva and I was part of the Government’s team. Talks ended with an agreement to meet in April for continued discussions, again in Geneva. The LTTE, however, backed off at the last minute. Subsequent attempts to resume negotiations failed and when the LTTE did turn up, nothing of substance ensued.
Instead the LTTE continued to carry out attacks, including the assassination attempts on the Defence Secretary and the Army Commander, the unsuccessful attack on the vessel “Pearl Cruise”, which was carrying 700 hundred soldiers, on the 11th of May 2006; while peace talks were in progress. Then there was the issue of “Marvil Aru”. The Government didn’t have any option but to counter the threat from a humanitarian point of view.

As Navy Commander what was your thinking at that point?
As a service commander I have to be prepared at all times to discharge my duties. In times of peace, we have to prepare for war and in times of war we have to prepare for peace. We also have to keep in mind how to adjust to post-war situations. This is the normal thinking and we didn’t deviate from this. I had to make

sure that the vessels, the personnel and the bases were always ready to respond to any eventuality. In doing so, my primary task was to achieve “sea control” and enforce “sea denial” to ensure safe sea lines of communication for legitimate shipping and to prevent LTTE receiving supplies.

It was clear that the LTTE had a grand strategy. They wanted to take the Jaffna Peninsula. To do this, they had to put a stop to all supplies to Jaffna where there were over 30,000 troops stationed. The plan was to choke the military in the peninsula. If they succeeded, the situation would have been totally different.

In order to do this, the LTTE had to break the supply route between Trincomalee and the peninsula. If they neutralized the Navy in Trincomalee, 90% of the plan would have been achieved.

As the first step of their grand strategy the LTTE blocked the “Marvil Aru” anicut to draw the limited Army troops stationed south of Muttur. The LTTE was occupying Sampoor at the time and the thinking was that they could overrun the small camps in the Muttur area and take control of the entire southern rim of Trincomalee harbour, thus enabling them to launch an attack on the Trincomalee main Naval camp and the Naval Dockyard.

Whilst engaging the Army at Marvil Aru, the LTTE executed the second step of their strategy by launching simultaneous attacks on 1st August 2006 at the troop carrier “Jetliner” off Trincomalee harbour which was carrying 1,100 Army troops, directing artillery fire at the naval dockyard and attacking the navy camp at Muttur. Although Muttur was a relatively small camp with just 180 men, they defended well and thwarted the LTTE plans to choke the harbour. The Navy successfully defended the Muttur navy camp, which facilitated Army and Navy reinforcements being inducted to south of Trincomalee. We sent troops by Sri Lanka Navy crafts manned by Sri Lanka Navy Special Boats Squadron. More than 700 troops were thereby transported to the Muttur area. They flushed the LTTE out and reinforced the Army Camps. That was the first failure of the LTTE in executing their grand strategy.

When the army conducted an operation to clear Sampoor which was occupied by the LTTE, we provided support by ensuring that the LTTE would not get any reinforcements from Alampil and Mullaitivu. This ensured that the LTTE did not get any supplies from sea routes and prevented them from escaping by sea from the Sampoor area.

There were two major confrontations with the LTTE during the Sampoor operation; firstly the LTTE deployed over 30 boats, in an attempt to bring in reinforcement from Mullaitivu to Sampoor. The Navy Fast Attack Squadron engaged these LTTE boats in a fourteen-hour battle on one occasion and in the other, we engaged them for 10-12 hours. We destroyed the boats and the LTTE suffered heavy casualties.

They withdrew back to Mullaitivu with their dead and wounded on both occasions. Thus their attempts to bring in reinforcement to Sampoor was totally denied. Throughout all this, we continued to carry out surveillance operations on the Western Coast, using smaller crafts, patrolling the seas from Kalpitiya towards the North. The North Western operations of course were limited since the major LTTE camps were located on the North Eastern Coast.

“Under All Circumstances A Decisive Naval Superiority Is To Be Considered A Fundamental Principle And The Basis Upon Which All Hope Of Success Must Ultimately Depend” George Washington – 1780

The Navy no doubt played and is playing a key role in the current offensive. Was there a difference in the thinking after you became Navy Commander?

Let me first talk a little about the history of the Navy. The Sri Lanka Navy was formed on the 9th of December, 1950 with a very small cadre. It developed gradually, but was essentially a ceremonial outfit. The major tasks included stopping illicit immigrants, search and rescue operations, aid to civil power, assisting government authorities during national calamities and anti-smuggling operations between India and Sri Lanka. Today there are 48,000 in the Navy.

It was only after 1980, when the LTTE problem become serious that a military dimension entered the equation. In mid-1985, the LTTE started its Sea Tiger Wing, ‘Kadalpoora’ and thus the Navy had to get involved in anti-terrorist activities at sea. Then there was also the issue of weapons smuggling and transporting of cadres for training and re-deployment. The Dvora was the culmination of the search for an answer to these new threats. Dvoras were introduced in the mid 1980s.

By early 1990s the LTTE had developed suicide boats, since they didn’t operate at a very high speed at the time our Dvora fast Attack craft could outmanoeuvre them. However, the LTTE improved their suicide craft, using multiple engines with higher horse power during the ceasefire from 2002 to 2006. With these improvements they were able to actually threaten the Dvora Fast Attack craft. This became very evident when the hostilities began in 2006. The LTTE acquired a lot of arms and ammunition, outboard motors, boats and other hardware during the ceasefire period. Even the Tsunami in December 2004 gave them cover to obtain foreign assistance in fibre glass boat building etc.

So we had to look for an alternative to the new scenario. The Sea Tiger boats were capable of doing 40 knots which is about 80 Km/h. We had to develop a counter strategy. Our answer was the small boat concept. Thus the Sri Lanka Navy

developed a low profile small boat with superior speed, high manoeuvrability and lethal fire power similar to the weapon outfit of a Dvora fast attack craft. Squadrons of these craft were stationed in strategic locations. This small boat concept was successful in effectively countering the LTTE suicide craft threat.
Our engineers did the necessary research and development. They took about six to eight months. They made moulds and then made larger versions of fiberglass dinghies and came up with a new and superior product which can sail in rough sea conditions. Our engineers are constantly working to improve the craft. We are in the process of building a larger craft that can stay at sea for longer periods and can reach higher speeds. Today we have over 150 such crafts. We build a new boat every 8 days on average. By building these boats indigenously, the Sri Lanka Navy saved millions and millions of rupees to the country.
This kind of warfare is known as asymmetric warfare. This is a new dimension in the maritime warfare in the world today. Many developed countries and developing countries are looking for an answer to counter this looming threat. Maritime terrorism is on the increase and posing a grave threat to world trade through sea routes. Almost all the countries are looking at how to safeguard their sea lines of communications from maritime terrorism which engages asymmetric warfare. The Sri Lanka Navy seems to have found the answer to this asymmetric threat.

The important factor is, you can't really purchase a Navy over night. A navy has to be built. While we did place orders for newer and more effective craft, we had to manage with what we had. We had to supplement what we had with our small boat concept. We upgraded the Dvoras. The LTTE at the time had 23mm guns, just like we did. We were a bigger target though. So we installed 30mm guns on our fast attack crafts to have the range advantage over the enemy.

"We Are A Silent Service" – Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda

You said earlier that suicide boats were only one aspect of the war that the Navy had to counter. How about the smuggling of arms and ammunition? Was there a difference in the thinking, in the approach?
Yes. We knew for a long time that the LTTE was bringing in a lot of war material from the sea, using mostly trawlers. They were bringing these shipments into Alampil, Mullaitivu, Chalai, and Chundikulam on the North Eastern Coast and to Nachchikuda, Silavathura on the North Western Coast.
In the early part of 2006, we destroyed nine trawlers and captured two more which

were bringing in arms and ammunition, mostly mortars and artillery rounds. We quickly realised that this would be a never ending exercise because there were lots of fishing trawlers and the LTTE was mingling with them. Given the limited resources at our disposal, we were finding it extremely difficult to put a total stop. Arms smuggling close to the shore was obviously a secondary phase of the overall operation. So we decided to address and engage the problem at the source, the large vessels which could be described as ‘Floating Warehouses’ from which the LTTE would take weapon consignments from time to time. To this end we had to find the locations of these large vessels. Hence we developed the Sri Lanka Navy intelligence network to a very high level. This was an important departure from the thinking and strategies adopted previously.

As we got more and more information, some from the intelligence network and some from captured Sea Tigers, we were able to find the points of origin and locations of floating warehouses. These were large ships that could be stationed in the high seas for any length of time as the high seas are categorized as common heritage of all mankind as per the Law of the Sea. We had to engage these ‘sources’ if we had to effectively block the LTTE’s supply of arms and ammunition. We did just that.

The first such floating warehouse we attacked was stationed 120 nautical miles east of Kalmunai. That would be around 250 Km. We effectively engaged this target on the 17th of September 2006. The Sri Lanka Air Force also supported us in this operation. The second ship, which was a larger vessel, was located 180 nautical miles (365 Km) south of Dondra. It was destroyed on the 28th of February 2007.

As a result of these operations, the LTTE shifted their floating warehouses farther south. On the 18th of March 2007, we destroyed 2 vessels, both located about 1800 km away from the South Eastern shore of Sri Lanka and close to Indonesia. Then on the 10th and 11th of September 2007, we destroyed three more vessels within a span of 24 hours, all of which were located about 3100 Km from Sri Lanka, almost at the door step of the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone.

There had been a fourth ship that had managed to get away during the attack on the 10th and 11th of September. We managed to track it down. This vessel was destroyed on the 17th of October 2007. When we engaged this last LTTE floating warehouse, she was located approximately 3400 Km south-southeast of Sri Lanka.

Taking a well calculated risk this unprecedented mission in far away waters from home was ventured deploying available limited vessels with improved endurance, improvised weaponry sans any state of the art Corvettes, Frigates or Destroyers.

The Plan Was To Choke The Military In The Peninsula. If They Succeeded,

The Situation Would Have Been Totally Different.

What was the impact of these operations, in your assessment?
We have concrete evidence regarding what these floating warehouses were carrying. These vessels were carrying over 80,000 artillery rounds, over 100,000 mortar rounds, a bullet-proof jeep probably earmarked for the LTTE leader, three aircraft in dismantled form, torpedoes and surface-to-air missiles. There were also a large number of underwater swimmer-delivery vehicles and a large quantity of diving equipment. There were radar equipment as well as outboard motors (OBMs) with higher horse power. All in all, there would have been more than 10,000 tons of war material in these floating warehouses.
The LTTE executed their grand strategy with “Marvil Aru” to take Jaffna peninsula expecting the huge military arsenal collected by the LTTE over the years could be brought into Sri Lanka uninterruptedly. Depriving the enemy of this huge arsenal was a decisive factor and has obviously helped the ongoing operation tremendously. Had the LTTE succeeded in getting these warlike material, the damage to troops would have been extremely severe. You have to keep in mind also that during the Ceasefire Agreement, arms and ammunition came not only through the sea, but from the Colombo Harbour as well!
However, it was our operations and the shift in focus in the overall strategy that really hurt the LTTE. After 2007, they were in shock regarding what happened to the supply lines (floating warehouses). The casualty reports of the present land operations also indicate the positive impact of these operations. There have been fewer artillery and mortar attacks after we destroyed the LTTE’s floating warehouses. There was a surge during the operation to liberate Kilinochchi, but this is from the stocks they already had and locally manufactured items.
No war effort can be sustained without having uninterrupted supply of logistics. The Sri Lanka Navy ensured this by destroying their floating warehouses which had over 10,000 tons of warlike material collected over a period of time, thus ensuring that the LTTE did not receive any warlike material during the last 2 ½ years.
We are aware that they have bought a few ships towards the latter part of 2008, but they are yet to come into the Indian Ocean. We are keeping a close watch, however.

You outlined that the key to success has been R&D, improved intelligence, the small boat concept and the decision to tackle the problem of arms shipments at the source. What was different in the execution of these plans?

What we have achieved surprised not only the LTTE, but even high ranking Naval and Defence personnel in developed navies such as those of USA, UK, India and Pakistan. Even Israel was surprised at the speed at which we managed to counter the asymmetric threat at sea as I mentioned earlier.
The difference was the team work, the determination of everyone, the improvisation, ingenuity and innovation. These, together, brought the desired results.
Today, our operations focus mostly on surveillance. After Silavatura was liberated we continued surveillance on the North Eastern seaboard. The LTTE's capacity to execute attacks at sea has been reduced to zero. This is evident when you look at the frequency of confrontations. In 2006, there were 21 encounters at sea, battles which lasted more than 10 hours. In 2007 there were eleven. Last year, in 2008, there were only two. The suicide boat threat has been neutralized. Under these circumstances they are now resorting to underwater activity with humans carrying explosive charges. The Sea Tigers, numbering around 400, according to intelligence reports, are now using their arms and ammunition on land which have been removed from their abandoned craft away from the beach. The Sea Tiger cadres are now being deployed in ground operations.
We are maintaining effective surveillance around the clock. The Sri Lanka Air Force assists us in coastal surveillance as well. In addition the Sri Lanka Navy maintains blue water surveillance.

The Unwavering Leadership Of His Excellency The President And The Defence Secretary Is The Key Factor. The Determination To Fight This To The Finish, Remaining Focused And The Decision To Provide Necessary Equipment To The Security Forces Went A Long Way In Helping Us Score The Successes We Did. Another Major Factor Is The Public Support For The Armed Forces And Police. Never In The History Of This War, During The Last 25 Years Have We Received Such Public Support.

The Navy has other responsibilities outside of countering the LTTE threat at sea. Could you speak about these and also the impact on fisheries activity?
Yes, we have to provide security for the Colombo, Trincomalee, KKS and Galle habours. We have to escort all merchant and passenger vessels plying between KKS and Trincomalee. In addition, all harbour operations such as pilotage of vessels, supervising unloading of cargo etc at KKS harbour are handled by the Navy. We also have to provide security for sea lines of communication between KKS and Colombo

as well as in and out of Colombo. Of course we also ensure that there is no smuggling and provide assistance to fishermen in distress etc. People tend to forget that if an Island nation like Sri Lanka didn't have an effective naval force, we could actually starve.
In addition, the Sri Lanka Navy continues to deploy over 12,000 naval personnel in operational areas in support of the Government's ground strategy.
We also have to provide security to fishery activities. Earlier there were tensions naturally, because the LTTE was operating in the guise of fishermen. However, when that threat was effectively countered, we were able to improve relations, ease restrictions imposed on fishery activities etc. We also have regular meetings with fishing communities in all areas so that fishery activities can be coordinated better.

A final question on the Navy's role in the war against terrorism: what in your mind was the turning point in the war or, to put it another way, what were the key differences this time around?
The unwavering leadership of His Excellency the President and the Defence Secretary is the key factor. The determination to fight this to the finish, remaining focused and the decision to provide necessary equipment to the security forces went a long way in helping us score the successes we did. Another major factor is the public support for the Armed Forces and Police. Never in the history of this war, during the last 25 years have we received such public support. His Excellency the President and Secretary of Defence motivated and galvanised the public and ensured their overwhelming support for us.
Apart from this, in a strictly operational sense, I think the turning point occurred when we destroyed the LTTE's floating warehouses, not taking anything from the efforts of the ground troops, the Army and Air Force of course. It was, overall, a combined effort, but from the point of view of the Navy, destroying the LTTE's arms supply lines was a major blow to the enemy.
At the same time, it must be remembered that credit was never something we were interested in. This was a menace that we had to get rid of. The Navy is traditionally a silent force. We just did our job. That's all.

PROFILE – Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda assumed command of the Sri Lanka Navy on the 1st of September 2005. In the 58-year history of the Sri Lanka Navy, he is the only officer to be considered for the highest seat of the Commander of the Navy straight from a Naval Area Command. He has achieved many firsts in his distinguished, decorative and unblemished Naval career among which is the fact that he is the first Naval Officer to be conferred with two Masters Degrees. He

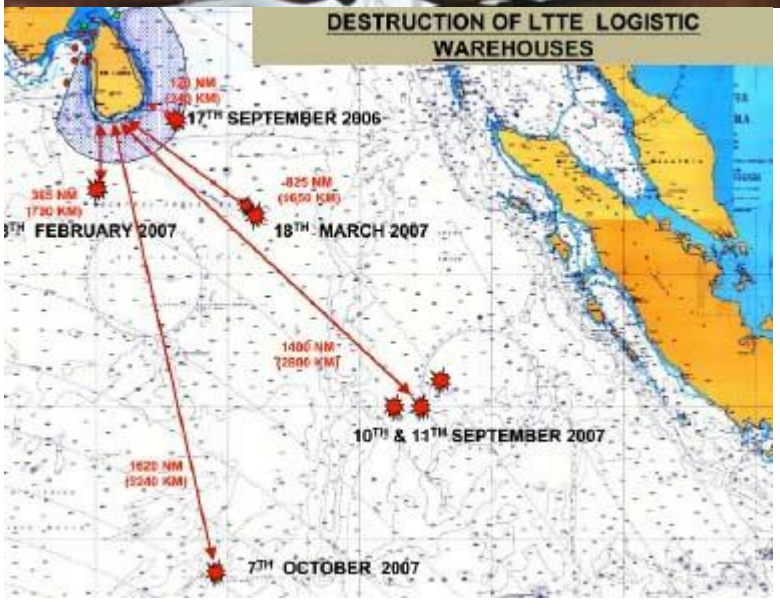
possesses Masters in Business Administration as well as in Defence Studies. He is also a member of the Royal Institute of Navigation and the Nautical Institute of the United Kingdom. He is an alumnus of the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii as well as the Near East-South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defence University in Washington DC. He also had the unique distinction of attending the Royal Naval Staff College in the United Kingdom in 1987 and the prestigious National Defence College in Pakistan in 2000. He graduated from both institutions with distinction. He has commanded the four Operational Naval Commands on seven occasions – Northern, Eastern and Western Commands twice each and North Central once, for a total period spanning six years. His administrative skills as an Area Commander has won the admiration of the 'Naval Family' for his ardent desire to boost up the infrastructure and living standards by successfully completing the projects with Naval resources and saving considerable sums of money. Vice Admiral Karannagoda was the first ever Director General (Operations) at Naval Headquarters. Prior to this, he served as Director Naval Operations, Director Naval Projects and Plans as well as Director Naval Personnel and Training. He had the honour of serving as the Commandant of the Naval and Maritime Academy, which certainly had an influence in his professional career. He also had served in the appointments of Deputy Area Commander (West), Deputy Area Commander (North) and Deputy Area Commander (East). As a specialized Navigator, he has held numerous appointments onboard naval vessels. He counts long years at sea and his sea career culminated in 1992 onboard SLNS Wickrama with the relinquishing of command and duties as the Commander of the 7th Surveillance Command Squadron. He is a recipient of the Rana Sura Padakkama for gallantry, Among the other medals awarded are Vishista Seva Vibhushanaya, Uttama Seva Padakkama, Republic of Sri Lanka Armed Service Medal, Sri Lanka Navy 50th Anniversary Medal, Sri Lanka Armed Service Long Service Medal, President's Inauguration Medal, 50th Independence Anniversary Commemoration Medal, North and East Operation Medal, Purna Bhumi Padakkama and Riviresa Campaign Service Medal.










DESTRUCTION OF LTTE LOGISTIC WAREHOUSES
17TH SEPTEMBER 2006
18TH MARCH 2007
10TH & 11TH SEPTEMBER 2007
7TH OCTOBER 2007

