THE MAN WHO COMMANDS THE SKY – Air Marshal Roshan Goonetileke



The sky is his terrain. His life is synonymous with the Sri Lanka Air Force as he is the son of a former Air Force Commander. Having lost his best friend and younger brother to enemy fire, he has braved personal loss to guide the Air Force to its current glory. His commitment and strategic direction has paved the way for numerous Air Force victories. Under his command the Air Force has developed to a

truly modern and high-tech fighting force. He has successfully confronted the world's first-ever terrorist air wing. Persevering to achieve success through teamwork, the Air force has proven its strength yet again by destroying the suicide aircrafts of the LTTE that appeared in the skies over Colombo recently. Air Force Commander, Air Marshal Roshan Goonetileke is on a constant vigil. His responsibilities are immense and he is adamant to see an end to the menace gripping the country. This is his life.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Thilini Kahandawaarachchi
Photography by Sanka Sammana

Your father was also the Air Force commander (1976 – 1981); can you tell how your background and your experiences since childhood formed your career?

Well, actually this is a very good way to start the interview. My father was in the Air Force for a very long time. He left the Air Force in 1981. During this time even as a small boy I was in the Air Force; mainly in Katunayake Air Base. From a very young age I had a longing in my heart to join the Air Force and be a pilot so that I could fly. My dream came true when my father gave me permission to join the Air Force in 1978. I must state that this is an experience that many people will not have; I mean growing up in the Air Force and then joining it to make a career. This rare experience gave me an immense advantage when I took office as the Commander of the Air Force. While I was growing up, I saw with my own eyes how the Air Force evolved to be such a big organisation having started off very small. During the initial stages, there were British people too working in the Air Force which has developed immensely since then. Actually all my ambitions and desires came true on January 13, 1978 when I enlisted in the Air Force. The first thing they did was; cut my hair very short and put me into the training mode. It was a good experience being in the Air Force as a small child. The memories are still there. Childhood memories last forever, don't they?

Your brother was also in the Air Force?

Yes, actually my brother joined 6 months after me. I remember my father asking him, "Your elder brother is already in the Air Force and do you also want to follow him?" My brother answered in the affirmative and my father gave him his permission. My brother was doing quite well, actually; according to the order of

seniority in the Air Force he was placed right after me. If he were alive today, he would have been the number two in the Air Force. Unfortunately he died in action, in 1995 when he was shot down by an enemy missile over Achchuveli area. It was a loss to the family. I must say that there are irreparable damages caused by terrorism. There are so many families who are feeling the loss of their loved ones. This is the very reason why this has to be finished very quickly.

I Must Say There Are Irreparable Damages Caused By Terrorism. There Are So Many Families Who Are Feeling The Loss Of Their Loved Ones. This Is The Very Reason That The War Has To End.

In 1995, when you lost your brother, were you under pressure from family and friends to leave the Air Force?

Surprisingly, there was no pressure from the family. They actually allowed me to make my own decision. At that time I was in the States undergoing training. That time when my brother died, the day before my best friend, Roger Weerasinghe also died. He was one number senior to me and my brother was one number junior to me and I was in the middle. I also remember friends cautioning me against coming back to Sri Lanka. I remember telling them that I have a duty to go back as the Government had sent me for training. I would not say I had pressure from my family as such. My father also did not tell me anything. In fact, the first question that he asked me was where I was going to serve after I finished the course. I knew I was going to be posted as the Northern Zonal Commander to Anuradhapura where all air operations related activities took place at that time.

You joined the Air Force in 1978, this was a time when the LTTE issue was at its incumbent stage and it has remained persistent through the years. How has this moulded your career?

Of course in 1978, problems were just brewing up but, it had not translated into any violence as such by then. I remember it was very peaceful up to 1982. However, after that we needed to drastically change our operational procedures, as terrorist groups had started committing violence disturbing the entire country. Due to this necessity our ceremonial Air Force was transformed into an operational outfit. The enemy was also developing its military capabilities every year with new equipment and increased recruitment. At that time I must say, we were reactive. We were not prepared. We were not proactive. It was only when the LTTE procured new weaponry, we armed ourselves in reaction. Even passenger carrying helicopters were fitted with guns and we were compelled to adopt many similar ad

hoc arrangements to counter the threat. Well we went on; finally at a particular time when the terrorists acquired missiles, we got into a very difficult situation, as we were not prepared for that. We lost a number of aircrafts including the AVRO that my brother was piloting in 1995 with many service and civil personnel on board.

That was the way that we developed. We started with a reactive approach but at a certain time we realised that we needed to go for the MI 24 helicopter gunships and Jets because of the fighting capabilities the enemy was acquiring. Therefore during the last phase of the Humanitarian Operations, we were right on top. Hence we can say that while expanding and developing through the last couple of years we maintained a very proactive approach towards our preparedness. Now we've reached where, I feel, the Air Force should really be.

Elaborating on that point further, can you tell us how the Air Force has evolved through the years? Especially, how have the Armed Forces worked together to achieve common goals?

When the Air Force started in 1951, it would have been less than 1,000 men and may be a few officers. Currently our strength is about 27,400 men and 1,300 officers. This is the massive expansion that has taken place where Human Resources are concerned. At the inception we had only a few aircrafts such as Chipmunks for training, Doves for light communication and some other types which did not have any fighting capability. Now we have many Squadrons; a number of Fighter Jet Aircraft Squadrons, Helicopter Squadrons and Transport Aircraft Squadrons both fixed wing and rotor wing (helicopters). These Squadrons are tasked to carryout their dedicated roles. So you can see the expansion that has taken place in the Air Force over a period of time.

During this last phase, all three Services and the Police have been cooperating and helping each other to work together as one group to finish this menace. During operations over the sea, we help the Navy, while they perform their task. Then when the Army advances forward, we provide air support and carry out both tactical and strategic air operations while promptly carrying out casualty evacuation missions. We have many discussions with the Army on what their plans are and how we can support them. Therefore you can say, there is a lot of interaction among the Forces at all levels. I think that is our strength.

With your experience, what is the major difference that has contributed to the military victories in the recent past?

The important factor is the role that the Secretary, Ministry of Defence plays as a person who has enormous experience in this field. A veteran on military operational issues, he directs and guides us with an absolutely clear vision; set right on the purpose. Therefore, whatever we ask, his approval has come quickly. Such support from the Secretary of Defence has had a positive outcome on the Humanitarian Operations that we did. We were given a wide frame to work on; no interferences and we were given the freedom to do what we needed to do. His Excellency the President desires peace for this country. He gives us his fullest support because he understands the aim of the Humanitarian Operations – that we need to end terrorism. Therefore with the correct leadership of the President, the Secretary of Defence, his understanding of the situation and his perseverance has enabled us to gain the current successes. In fact this environment has helped us in an unprecedented manner to suppress and destroy the LTTE's war making capability.

When were you appointed as the Commander of the Air Force? Could you describe the situation when you assumed duties as Air Force Commander?

I was appointed as Commander of the Air Force on June 12, 2006. I joined in 1978 and I was appointed as the Commander in 2006. I was 50 years old then. However my life in the Air Force dates back to the time my father was in the Air Force although I did not practically experience it. That is more than 50 years. I knew what the Air Force was and I saw it with my own eyes. I see it today also, as it is.

At the time I assumed duties, the Ceasefire Agreement with the LTTE was hanging in the balance and it was also the time when an attempt was made on the Army Commander Lt General Sarath Fonseka's life. The LTTE was blatantly violating the peace process while carrying out various attacks on members of the security forces. They were actually spoiling for a fight. Then there were many attempts by the Government to get them to the negotiating table. In fact they went to Geneva once and the second time they didn't come. So the situation was where the LTTE thought that they could start something and get the advantage, little knowing that we were also preparing ourselves because of the foresight of the Secretary of Defence. When I became the Commander of the Air Force in June 2006, I took the then developments as a challenge as I have been in this situation for a very long time. However, since we had the support of our people and highly motivated security force members, we were able to move forward. You can now see the

results for yourself.

You Can Have A Good Machine But If That Person Is Not Trained To Fly An Aircraft Or Use The Machine Then There Is No Use…We Introduced Top Quality Training And Development Of Human Resources In Moulding Them Into Effective And Efficient Operational Assets.

As Air Force Commander what are the changes you made since assuming duties?

Well there were a lot of changes that I did. We needed to motivate and train our people really well. We also needed to decentralise our command in certain areas. Of course the most important element of conducting air operations is still under central command. You can have a good machine but if that person is not trained to fly an aircraft or use the machine then there is no use. So we really needed to introduce top quality training and development of human resources in moulding them into effective and efficient operational assets. Therefore, much prominence was given to training.

After I took over Command and the East was cleared I re-established the Air Force Academy back in China Bay. I brought flying training back to China Bay and started a few weeks ago and they have already started flying. The Trincomalee area is now seeing a lot of flying activity and in my thought it is the best place out of all to conduct flying training. Our Academy is now accredited by the University of Kelaniya and we award first degrees leading to Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Aviation Studies to Cadets who join with Advanced Level qualifications. We also conduct a Postgraduate Diploma Programme for Commissioned Officers and a Certificate Course for other ranks again in affiliation with the University of Kelaniya and Rajarata University respectively.

Then we moved on to technology. Firstly, I focused very much on increasing our capabilities on information gathering in order to execute missions with no mistakes. You need to be accurate and then you need to see where you are going. You need to know how you are operating. The pilot needs to be fed with all possible information for him to successfully complete his mission. Being a technical organisation we depend on technology 100%. So whatever was available for us we incorporated it into our system and refined our system. Talking of reconnaissance, we have harnessed technology very well so that real time information on Humanitarian Operations is available for all operational Flying Squadrons and other

military establishments that are directly engaged in the current campaign. The pilot after seeing the live picture takes on the target. In that sense, the Unmanned Arial Vehicle (UAV) Systems introduced have paid off extremely well. We have obtained that kind of technological expertise to get our things going effectively.

As I mentioned before, we have expanded the Air Force from 19,000 when I took over, to nearly 28,000 but we will go up to 35,000 as we have a role even on the ground. We need to relieve infantry units of the Army to perform the most vital role on ground while we hold on to the rear areas. We have established field formations in Morawewa, Trincomalee and Puliyankulam areas. We are holding areas further up the A9 road as well. At the same time the Air Force looks after their own camps. For that, we have our own regiments in charge of this function. We are planning to expand it to other areas as well. For example, we are hoping to establish camps in the areas liberated from the clutches of terrorists where our ground troops will be utilised to perform the role of defending them. We have already established a few operational formations in certain locations in the Wanni Sector.

We have purchased additional MIG 27 aircraft. There was a lot of controversy created about this in the media saying that these were not good. However the aircraft are performing absolutely well. I mean now there are no questions asked. We have purchased additional F7 aircraft for the interceptor role with some air-to-air missiles to meet the new developments. With the generous assistance of the Indian Government we have established ground equipment for our defences such as Anti Aircraft Guns. We have also started infrastructure development such as, shelters for aircraft, hangars, resurfacing runways and accommodation for Air Force personnel. These are the things we have started to do.

Since you were talking about Morawewa and also the other activities of the Air Force, could you elaborate a little bit more on the responsibilities of the Air Force?

Actually Morawewa was an Agricultural farm that my father started about a year before he took over command. Then around the 1990s, it was given to the Police Department to establish a training facility for themselves. Subsequently, I inquired from the IGP at that time, if I could have that camp back as we had a lot of plans for that area. He graciously gave the camp back to us. Since then, we established our Regiment Special Forces there, where even training is conducted. We thought it would be good for them to train there because they can give security for the entire area as the villagers are now returning. We were able to help the villagers by

preparing about two acres of agricultural land for each of them to cultivate. They will be ready for their harvest in about a month's time.

We have cleared about two to three hundred acres and given the land to them. We are also trying to give them a lot of facilities, such as welfare facilities. Our Seva Vanitha Unit has implemented a big programme. Those children in the villages have not experienced freedom like this before as that area had a lot of restrictions on movement due to terrorist activities. So we have established a protective ring around the villages and actually many people are returning to their original places. This is a good sign in regaining peace as these areas must develop now. Villagers must start their day-to-day activities in order to bring back the normalcy to their lives and it must become an area conducive for peaceful living. In Morawewa, we had four small camps along the road with about 250 people. But now we have bigger camps, with about 2,500 people in the jungle and around the villages who are doing a good job. Actually it is very nice to see the villagers smiling and their children playing around, going to school etc. That's the happiness you get after you bring the troubles they are faced with to an end.

What about the other responsibilities of the Air Force, such as providing security to the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA)?

Yes, BIA security was entrusted to us a long time ago as our Katunayake camp is right next door and we are protecting that base as well. Therefore it was easy for us to expand our defences to cover the BIA. It is a big responsibility as this is a very lucrative economic target for the terrorist outfit. The implications on the Sri Lankan economy and the society would always be devastating if the operations at the International Airport are hampered. So it is a big task. We have consolidated our defences and deployed a lot of personnel in this place.

I Need To Comment On His Excellency The President's Leadership; His Excellent And Correct Leadership As Well As Making Correct Decisions. Then The Secretary Of Defence Gave The Impetus To The Services On What Needs To Be Done.

Previously, the LTTE was able to attack the Air Force and suspend flights, however this time around we find that the Air Force has been successful and it has not had to suspend its operations; can you tell us what is different now?

Well, actually now I need to start from outside the Air Force. When the Humanitarian Operations started with Marvil Aru, you could see how the leadership

of this country recognised the situation and rallied everybody around. I think every citizen in this country gave their fullest support to the operations to finish terrorism. You found various people saying various things but then that happens in any country. However all in all, if you take the majority they wanted to finish this. This is where I need to comment on His Excellency the President's leadership; his excellent and correct leadership as well as making correct decisions. Then the Secretary of Defence gave the impetus to the services on what needs to be done. Especially, after he listened to all our briefings and existing capabilities and projected our requirements, everything was given to us very quickly without questioning. It was our duty then to motivate our pilots and subordinates and adjust our systems, so that we will have the edge over the enemy. Our main aim was to break the will to fight and the fighting capability of the LTTE completely. Pilots are fired upon most of the time when they carry out missions. A lot of untold hardships are braved by them day in day out solely due to their understanding of the need of the hour.

Nevertheless, equipping aircraft with reliable "Self Protecting Systems" gave a lot of operational space for our pilots to reach the enemy locations to execute their missions accurately. This was further strengthened by the Tactics and Techniques they employed on their daring missions which are only attributable to the wealth of experience, skills and knowledge gained over a period of time through sheer dedication. Now we all function as one team with a clear-cut mission to meet the objectives of the nation.

A few months ago a helicopter came with 26 bullet holes, it was damaged everywhere and was manned by a Squadron Commander. It's tough, but since they are motivated they were taking on the responsibility very well. We involve them in the decision making process, we tell them "this is our aim, this is what we have to do" and we give them the freedom to do what needs to be done. Then at the headquarters also we play a proactive role; looking into their needs and requirements. So everything fell into place and when the victories were attained, when the Army was marching forward and the Air Force was destroying many targets, you see it on ground. This is the difference between now and then.

Earlier, there were accusations that the Air Force aerial bombing was indiscriminate, however in the recent past aerial attacks have been more accurate – what measures were taken to achieve this? Especially, how is this in line with the zero civilian casualties strategy?

We had the same pilots and the same aircrafts but in today's context because of their motivation and commitment, they maintained their profile and did their targeting. So ground fire didn't make them pull up and turn back, or drop their bombs from high up. They took their time even though they were being fired at, and took their targets well. That is the secret of these operations. The credit must go to the pilots and also to the technicians who service these air-craft. Usually if a mission starts at 5.30 in the morning, the technician has to start his work at 1am in the morning. The airmen who load the ordinance (munitions) have to be extremely safety conscious and very professional because the life of the pilot depends on their actions. The whole process is a team effort; the team in this case involves all those uniformed personnel who are a part of the whole gamut of SLAF functions. It's one team; and it's the team that gets the credit, not one person. The pilot finally executes the mission in the face of enemy fire and that too successfully, for this he needs to be especially appreciated and success credited to his name.

It has been proven now that the Air Force is fully in line with Zero Civilian Casualty Strategy. We release UV footage at times like the recent attack on Soosai's headquarters so that it will show you exactly what we are doing. Next to the target there was a wall and a building. Even the wall is still intact. That shows our accuracy.

On rare occasions when targets of very high military value are located and engaged, structures sustain damage, in such cases civilians in the close vicinity, may get injured, but we have never wilfully targeted civilians. In fact there were some good targets that we could have taken but we did not because civilians were there. Therefore the accusations are baseless.

The Air Force has been crucial to the current military successes can you elaborate as to how this was achieved?

The Air Force area of operations includes both the land and the sea and its mobility is not restricted. It is the single arm that has the capacity to reach out towards the enemy with terrain not influencing its operations. The enemies logistics facilities, its communication lines, training centres, leaders' hideouts, boat building yards, hiding places and command centres etc were all located far behind their lines away from the Army frontlines and the Army artillery positions. As the Air Force has no borders or terrain restrictions we cross the lines and go and engage these targets. The Air Force is crucial in the sense that our strategic campaign is to destroy the enemy's ability to wage war. It was a crucial role that we played. If we

as the Air Force failed to dismantle the enemy infrastructure they would retain the morale, the will and the ability to continue fighting. I have said before, that the results of our actions would be felt later on the ground as you can see now. The terrorists can't sustain their fighting capacity or their resource requirements – their will to fight and their backbone is broken, they have no infrastructure and their guns and boats have been destroyed. It was a planned strategic air operation. In the mean time at the tactical level we provide close air support to the Army, which is a necessity. The task here is similar to the role carried out by artillery but the important difference is the element of flexibility and the ability to select the target or change targets by observing visually. MI 24 Attack Helicopters are the machines employed in this role. Their success can be attributed to the superb communication and coordination the pilots have built up with the Ground Commanders. We use our surveillance aircraft and surveillance UAVs to have real time images of the terrain and also enemy activity. These images in addition to being used extensively by the SLAF are transmitted to frontline Divisions for real time decision making and planning.

Air transport and casualty evacuation operations are rarely heard of or spoken of. These are integral functions of supporting fighting Divisions in the field. These operations are routine and their frequency is much greater than offensive air operations and carried out irrespective of fair or foul weather. The number of troops and tonnage of combat cargo hauled since 2006 by the SLAF is huge in comparison to its resources thus once again depicting the commitment and the tenacity of the pilots and the maintenance crews to keep their machines in the air. The number of soldiers, sailors and policemen garrisoned on the Jaffna Peninsula being large the onus of ferrying troops to and from leave was shared between the Air Force and the Navy until opening of the land route a few days ago.

In order to be more effective and successful we reviewed some of our tactics and in some cases changed the approach. Commencing night operations were one such tactic, and Jets started carrying out high-level night missions. Next we took the decision to do low level night missions. The risk involved in low level night engagements is greater in comparison to en-gagements during daylight. It was a challenge and the pilots had to be trained to do it, they developed the skills and they did it well. MI 24 Helicopters had been carrying out night opera-tions since their inception but since of late they increased their frequency of operations and also reviewed their tactics, resulting in a greater level of success. Therefore with the night operations, the enemy was not able to regroup in the night. That is also

another chapter of our success story.

It’s One Team; And It’s The Team That Gets The Credit Not One Person. The Pilot Finally Executes The Mission In The Face Of Enemy Fire And That Too Successfully, For This He Needs To Be Specially Appreciated And Success Credited To His Name.

The Air Force has been instrumental in destroying the upper echelon of the LTTE including Thamilchelvam and also destroying training camps etc. Could you tell us a little bit more about this?

This fell within our strategic objective of destroying the LTTE’s morale, will and in short, the ability to wage war and sustain itself on the field.
We went about this task by targeting their leadership, training bases, fuel dumps, ammunition dumps, artillery positions, runways, Sea Tiger boats, boat building facilities, camps and all infrastructural facilities. The success of these missions resulted in their war waging capacity being destroyed. We attacked the training bases in the mornings and then they shifted the training to the night, we did not let the enemy rest then we engaged them in the night. In that way, we did not allow them to move, we hit them hard, and we hit their backbone and choked their communication lines and broke their will to fight. Actually we destroyed a large number of Sea Tiger attacks and also logistic craft on the beaches, at their moorings and at sea whilst on the move. If you remember, we showed some footage last year about a fuel farm catching fire after being engaged; we destroyed about 300,000 litres of fuel there.

We also attacked and destroyed a large number of artillery pieces. Continuous accurate bombardment of many earth bunds resulted in large breaches being caused through which the infantry then fought their way through. Earth moving machinery of the LTTE became targets of immense importance after they resorted to the ditch cum bund tactic. The number of earth moving machines destroyed or immobilised during this phase of Humanitarian operations was substantial.

Coming to the upper levels of the LTTE; speaking of Thamilchelvam, we got information that he was at a particular location, so we hit him and he died there. We were successful in targeting many leaders. Actually there is intelligence to say that most of their middle level leaders perished in air raids.

Thus, the top leaders have lost the vital conduit with their cadres on the field.

The leadership was targeted mainly for that. When their cadres on the field fail, the whole LTTE structure was irreparably ruptured. Of course the Army and the Navy have their own successes, but I am talking only about the Air Force.

We targeted Soosai. We do know that a senior leader died there. However they have not disclosed this since Thamilchelvam's issue. The terrorists do not disclose losses due to air attacks because they have realised it is counter productive. In 2007, we injured Prabhakaran. Even though there were people saying it was impossible, he was actually injured, we have finally got information to say that he was injured and he recovered only after a long time. Maybe he is alright now, however our target is to get him as well. We are targeting other leaders such as Pottu Amman, Kapil Amman and all these terrorists. They will not be able to hide for a long time. We will come to know where they are hiding and when we come to know we will hit them.

We Went About This Task By Targeting Their Leadership, Training Bases, Fuel Dumps, Ammunition Dumps, Artillery Positions, Runways, Sea Tiger Boats, Boat Building Facilities And Camps And All Infrastructural Facilities. The Success Of These Missions Resulted In Their War Waging Capacity Being Destroyed.

The LTTE is believed to be the first and the only terrorist organisation to have its own air wing. What were your first thoughts when you heard that the LTTE had its own air wing?

It was in 2005, when I was the Director Operations that we found out that the LTTE was making runways and we actually saw two aircrafts. However, we could not do anything because a cease-fire was in force. Actually the ceasefire was very detrimental to us because they acquired aircrafts, built their runways. During that period everything that went for development of the North was used for these kinds of activities. Many things were sent under the pretext of development to the North, but when you go to see, nothing has happened there. This is what they did; the LTTE were building and developing their terrorist infrastructure. The necessity of an Air Defence System was identified prior to all these but it was only after this government came into power that we received all the support we needed. India graciously gave us some radars. Though these were 2D radars, we still managed to detect the LTTE aircraft.

The journey from that first observation of their air assets to the last incident has

been a long and arduous one, but I think we have succeeded in destroying their air capability.

As the Commander of the Air Force – you are responsible in protecting the Sri Lankan air space and invariably the entire land mass and the territorial sea – what were the challenges and how did you overcome these challenges?

I believe that peace will come when the Humanitarian Operations are over and I believe it will be over very quickly. Then our task will be to patrol the maritime boundary and the Ex-clusive Economic Zone, which is about 200 miles. Therefore there is a lot of water mass that we have to protect. We have an advantage because we can go quickly, detect something and then the Navy can go and do the necessary inspections. Considering the new trends in International Terrorism and sea piracy I see a major role for us to play.

Then of course having a continuous reconnaissance capability over land is also a necessity. We also have to develop our air-to-air capability. Whatever said and done, an Air Force has to be prepared during peace for the eventuality of war and also an efficient military machine is always a deterrent. In 1980 we were not prepared. It is always cost-effective to be prepared. The Government also understands this. Even though the present issue is going to be over soon, we have to continue training. We have to be ready and our skills need to be re-assessed in light of future threats and developed proactively. The fighter capabilities and reconnaissance have to be maintained. Of course there are certain assets that we have to maintain for commercial ventures and also to earn revenue for the Government.

How do you think the LTTE managed to train the Air Tigers? Recently, there was a report that the LTTE had received training from a South African organisation. What are your thoughts on this?

Yes, I saw that news article about the LTTE acquiring their aircrafts from a South African flying club. I don’t know for sure, but these aircrafts have been manufactured in Czechoslovakia. As they are fully aerobatic, these can be used as a sporting aircraft and as a training air-craft. These can carry about four people on board. With two people, it can carry about 250 Kg of weight, which they used to pack in explosives in the recent attack. I believe the LTTE acquired these during the ceasefire.

There may have been foreign pilots supporting the Tigers' flying element initially, but one of the suicide cadres has now been positively identified as a local and the other too should be.
The LTTE was planning on having a large air wing and probably strengthen it as well. We saw the runway being extended, what for? A small aircraft does not need that.

The Journey From The First Observation Of LTTE Air Assets To The Last Incident Has Been A Long And Arduous One But I Think We Have Succeeded In Destroying Their Air Capability.

Just a few days ago, the LTTE sent two aircrafts to Colombo, it seemed like it was a desperate measure on the LTTE's part, they used two aircrafts and two pilots on a suicide mission. However the Air Force proved itself again with its timely action – how did the Air Force tackle this?

Once they were airborne we were informed by ground troops close to the location from where they got airborne. Immediately the Air Defence network went into action and they were tracked on the radars and interceptor aircrafts were airborne from Katunayake. It would have been a disaster if the LTTE had succeeded in ramming their intended targets because they were carrying 230 Kg of explosives. I feel that the Inland Revenue building was damaged because the LTTE pilot was hit and he lost control and the aircraft exploded against the building. The Anti-Aircraft Gunners were vigilant and very accurate which resulted in their success and also I have to especially mention the personnel manning the searchlights, as it is very difficult to get away once a searchlight captures the position. Therefore it was easier for the gunners to strike the aircraft. This was the same at Katunayake as well. We of course know what happened at Katunayake; the pilot was fatally injured in the chest by an anti aircraft round and also his whole air craft was damaged.

There are many criticisms as to why the Air Force did not intercept the two aircrafts before they reached Colombo. What is your response to this?

Air Defence (AD) system includes many interconnected elements. The functions of an AD system very broadly are Observation, Identification, Interception and Destruction. The first and second functions are met through the radars and other related surveillance equipment. The second and third functions are met through the layered deployment weapons systems. The first of these is the air-to-air element, which is the aircraft that are armed with missiles. The next layer ideally should be anti-aircraft missile batteries but due to the cost and availability issues we have not deployed missile batteries, but we have integrated a limited number of shoulder

fired missiles within the next layer, which is anti-aircraft gun batteries.

Flying low in the night is a tough task even for an experienced pilot. Unfortunately we got the toughest task as our first challenge. As you know, when you are tried by fire, you come out with flying colours. Our pilots and Air Defence Controllers worked very hard. We have reached a situation where we can detect an aircraft and intercept. Recently, an LTTE aircraft was shot down over Mullaitivu, which proved our interception capabilities were successful. Following this, the LTTE had done some technical and tactical changes with their aircraft to evade the detection profile. We found it difficult at first. But since the enemy would have taken the upper hand we had to quickly make some adjustments.

However, in the recent suicide attempt the aircraft was flying very low and due to some small technicality our aircraft was not able to shoot him down, but then our next layer of defences the Anti-Aircraft Guns shot both aircrafts down. As far as I am concerned, the Air Defence System worked. Special credit must be given to the gunners and the operators of the radars and the total AD network. I think I must give credit to the pilots here, again, because in a very short time they mastered the techniques and managed to shoot down an aircraft in the night. The Air Force pilot had to fly very low, at about 300-400 feet and shoot the aircraft down and that is not something that is easy to do. We are ready for anything. I must say that since it was the most difficult task to do, our fighter pilots mastered the art and they are confident to do this type of operations.

When we shot down a LTTE aircraft over Mullaitivu, it was done with an interceptor aircraft. In the recent attack, the aircraft missed due to some technical issue, but the next layer achieved its set objective. Actually it is good for people to criticise and then for us to come and tell what actually happened and the reasons for that. Any developed country has these three different layers in their Air Defence System; otherwise they can do away with the guns and the missiles and have only an aircraft flying. You have to keep in mind that is a very small target; flying in the night at low level. This indeed is a new experience in this field. Thus it’s a case of trial and error; we have succeeded in preventing the terrorists achieving their objective.

The Anti-Aircraft Gunners Were Vigilant And Very Accurate Which Resulted In Success And Also I Have To Especially Mention The Personnel Manning The Searchlights, As It Is Very Difficult To Get Away Once A Searchlight

Captures The Position.

After this attack the LTTE claimed that the raid was successful and also the international media organisations were quick to announce that Colombo had been attacked without verifying the information, as to the two planes being shot down. As the person who is in the middle of it all, what is your reaction to such media reports and what do you think the role of the media is in reporting such incidents?

Actually sometimes the media has to report what they see because they are also human and they see things from their angle. I am talking about the general media, I am not talking about the terrorist website. Therefore, what they see, they report. Of course today you can see that nothing has happened to the Inland Revenue building, so it was a failure. Even in Katunayake nothing has happened. The terrorist is a terrorist, and they would have been ready with the news when this operation was going on and that is how they do it now. When it went wrong, I don't think they had time to recover that message. So it is a failure, everybody can see, all civilians can see.

The media has a very responsible role to play. At times security concerns prevent the re-lease of information. In such cases they will report what they see which may not be the whole picture.
When you don't tell them everything, they will report with what they have. Why didn't we shoot it down with an aircraft? Of course when you take the whole picture it was shot down. So, it's good for people to criticise and people to learn. Of course being human, sometimes it is very difficult when you get criticised. But I think that is a check and balance system that is taking place.

In the past few days, the LTTE has approached the Co-Chairs and called for a ceasefire? What are your thoughts on this?

LTTE is a banned organisation, so what is there to talk? I think His Excellency has said in no uncertain terms on numerous occasions "lay down your arms".

I Hope That People Of All Races And Denominations Will Have The Opportunity To Live Together And Work As One To Develop This Country. We Have Tremendous Potential In Sri Lanka To Develop; Our People Are Educated And Have Good Innovative Ideas, Once This Problem Is Over They Can Express Themselves.

What are your thoughts on being part of the winning team?

Of course it feels good to be part of the winning team; to know that our actions, belief in our strengths and the ability to achieve those as one team. We are all one team and credit should go to the whole team. Therefore we are happy. Obviously when a country develops there will be other issues, other problems, but the main barrier is over now; hopefully terrorism will be eradicated for good.

Finally, to end the interview what do you see in the future?

I must say that this Humanitarian Operation is coming to an end. I have seen it from its inception, so I am very happy that before I leave this office it will be over. It brings a lot of happiness to me and my family and all the people who are serving in the Air Force. The Army, Navy, Air Force and the people of Sri Lanka will be happy to see an end to this. I hope that people of all races and denominations will have the opportunity to live together and work as one to develop this country. We have tremendous potential in Sri Lanka to develop; our people are educated and have good innovative ideas, once this problem is over they can express themselves. I must specially mention that the public has given us tremendous support. The whole country was mobilised to fight against terrorism. Public support was vital for our successes. My sincere hope is that Sri Lanka will be able to prosper and that all families would be able to live in peace. We can be an example for other countries that terrorism can be put down militarily, then the country can move forward. The way we put down terrorism is the way to put it down. I hope that this will be an example, and other countries would learn from this. Finally I would like to remember all the sacrifices that were made by heroic personnel of the Armed Forces and the Police and their families. Let the peace that comes be a tribute to them all.

PROFILE – Air Marshal W D R M J Goonetileke was born on February 28, 1956 and completed his education at St. Peter's College, Bambalapitiya where he excelled both in studies and in sports. He is the elder son of the 5th Commander of the Air Force Air Chief Marshal Harry Goonetileke. Air Marshal W D R M J Goonetileke joined the Sri Lanka Air Force as an Officer Cadet in the General Duties Pilot Branch on January 13 1978. On successful completion of flying training he was commissioned in the rank of Pilot Officer on August 24, 1979. During his illustrious career of 28 years, he has held a number of Command, Operational and Administrative appointments. Having logged many flying hours both in fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft when serving in the capacity of an operational pilot and as Commanding Officer of Number 3 Maritime Squadron and Number 4 Helicopter Wing, he took up senior operational command appointments as the Zonal Commander Northern Zone

and Zonal Commander Eastern Zone. He has also commanded Air Force Bases in Katunayake, Anuradhapura and China Bay. He served a very successful tenure as the Director of Operations/Deputy Chief of Staff Operations of the Air Force before being appointed as the Chief of Staff. Air Marshal W D R M J Goonetileke graduated from the Air Command and Staff College, Air University, Alabama, USA in 1994 and had also attended the prestigious National Defence College in Pakistan in 2001. In recognition of his distinguished service career, he has been awarded with the Visishta Seva Vibushanaya and Uttama Seva Padakkama. He has been awarded with the Gallantry Medal ‘Rana Wikrama Padakkama’ twice for the bravery displayed in conducting operations.





