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Pirapaharan, Chapter 30 LTTE Guerrillas in Action

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published February 11, 2004



30. LTTE Guerrillas in Action

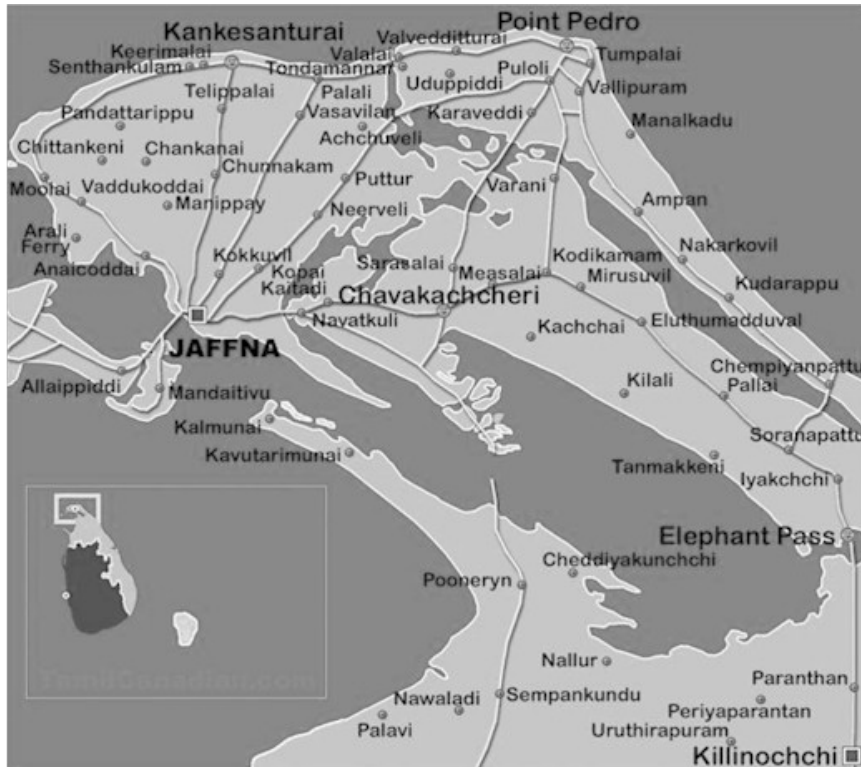
Nelliady Ambush

Pirapaharan's wish to raise an LTTE army on the lines of Subash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army was natural because he had already gathered a group of active and committed cadres. He had trained over 25 youths and a few of them were already preparing in their camp in Atchchuveli to give the police, the navy and the Jayewardene government a taste of what was in store.

The group, headed by Mahattaya, experimented with three modes of guerrilla attacks- ambush, land mine and assault on security establishments- between 2 July and 27 October. Before that, the LTTE had concentrated- except for Seelan's attack on the army on 15 October 1981- on police investigators, informants and collaborators. The group, this time, tried out their attacks in quick succession to create maximum effect.

Shankar was placed in charge of the ambush. Sellakili handled the landmine experiment and Seelan the assault on a security establishment. Shankar, Sellakili and Seelan were considered by Pirapaharan as clever, courageous and capable.

Shanker, whose real name was Satiyanathan, was the son of Selvachandran Master, a teacher, of Kambarmalai, a village next to Valvettithurai, the birthplace of Pirapaharan. He was also known as Suresh. He had two brothers and a sister. His father lived in a well-constructed big house on a side road, situated about 500 meters beyond Pandithar's house, which was close to Kambarmalai Public Library. He was Pandithar's college mate and joined the LTTE at the age of 20. He was born on 19 June 1961. He lived in Chennai in 1981 and was sent by Pirapaharan in early 1982 to launch attacks on the police. Pirapaharan was keen that the LTTE do "something big" to prevent PLOTE claiming legacy to the LTTE's image. PLOTE had caught the imagination of the Tamil people after its daring Anaikoddai Police Station attack and the Kilinochchi bank robbery.



Jaffna Peninsula

With Seelan, who had already become a hero with his 15 October 1981 attack on the army, Shanker planned the ambush.

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They decided to take on the night police patrol which went round the villages around Valvetithurai. Shankar and his colleagues watched its movement for about a week and selected a lonely spot close to Nelliady junction for their ambush.

Thick-lipped and soft-spoken, Shankar, who sported a moustache, and his men waited on both sides of the road. They were thrilled when they saw around 7.30 p.m. the headlights of the police jeep at a distance. Shankar alerted his colleagues. Shankar, a crack shot, shot the driver, Police Constable Ariyaratna, as the jeep approached them. The bullet pierced the head and Ariyaratna applied the break and slumped in his seat, dead. The jeep shook to a sudden halt. Shankar fired again before the policemen could react, killing constable Gunapala, seated behind. His colleagues shot dead constables Arunthavarajah and Mallawarachchi. Inspector Thirusittambalam, who sat on the front seat, and constables Sivarajah and Ananda, were hurt.

The Tigers quickly removed the weapons from the policemen, stopped a passing car, pushed the driver and the passengers out, and sped away. Police reacted in what had become the usual pattern: assaulted civilians, burnt vehicles, shops and houses in the vicinity of Nelliady, Alwai, Vathiri and Karaveddy and arrested 20 youths.

TULF leaders Amirthalingam and Sivasithamparam issued a statement the next day condemning the Nelliady attack and Cyril Mathew issued another statement welcoming the TULF statement. TULF said it never condoned violence and Mathew praised the TULF for condemning "terrorist violence." Though it looked like an innocent routine, Jayewardene, through Mathew, was widening the cleavage he had engineered between the moderate Tamil leadership and the militants.

Failed Landmine Attack

Nearly three months later, on 29 September 1982, the day President Jayewardene visited Jaffna to campaign for the presidential election held on 20 October, LTTE militants led by Sellakili launched their first - failed - landmine attack. They wanted to give a violent dimension to the hartal staged by the TELF, GUES and some Communist organizations protesting against Jayewardene's visit.



Amirthalingam and Sivasithamparam

Sellakili whose real name was Sathasivam Selvanayagam, hailed from Kalviyankadu, an agricultural village, two kilometers from Jaffna on the Point Pedro road. He was one of the founder members of the LTTE and earned fame for his quick and alert actions after the shooting of Inspector Bastiampillai in April 1978. He grabbed Bastiampillai's sub-machine gun the moment he put it down to accept the cup of tea offered to him and shot Bastiampillai with it. Pirapaharan selected Sellakili to specialize in landmines because of his quickness and alertness.

The army explosives team that examined the unexploded landmines reported that they had been improvised by the LTTE. They bore no trademark and their shape and packing were crude. They were made of cast iron cylinders. Five kilos of explosives and steel pieces were packed into each of them. The landmines were connected by a wire which was connected to a portable "Honda" generator that supplied the electricity for the exploder that activated the landmines.

Sellakili and his colleagues picked the daily naval convoy that crosses Ponnalai Causeway for their experimental attack. Karainagar Naval Base did not have fresh water. Water available there was salty. Fresh water used for cooking and drinking was fetched from Moolai, a village in the mainland. Three tankers left every morning for this task. Two navy jeeps provided escort to the water tankers.

On 29 September the convoy left Karainagar at around 6.30 a.m. Petty Officer Selvaratnam was in command. Twelve naval personnel boarded the two jeeps.

The convoy moved leisurely along the causeway.

September is usually dry in the Jaffna peninsula. It was before the break of the north-east monsoon which brings rains to the north-eastern part of Sri Lanka. Sandy mounds dotted the lagoon bed on both sides of the road. On some mounds, shrubs had grown. Sellakili and his men dug the road at four places about 100 meters from the southern end and buried the landmines. They were connected by a wire which ran to a thick bush on a sand mound. The holes on the road where the landmines were buried and the ditch through which the wire was laid were neatly covered and tarred. The wire that ran through the lagoon bed was covered with sand. The wire was connected to the generator.

Sellakili waited near the generator with the exploder in his hand. Aruna stood by the generator. He was in charge of operating it.

The convoy came at the usual time. Sellakili misjudged its speed. He pressed the exploder when the jeep leading the convoy was about 50 meters away. The first mine exploded throwing up the steel pieces, stones and sand. It created a meter deep crater. The other three mines did not explode.

Sellakili ordered all to run to the minibus. They ran parallel to the road. Aruna ran carrying the generator. He found it difficult as it was too heavy and his legs sank into the sand. He dropped the generator and ran. They were just 50 to 100 meters in front of the navy personnel who did not fire even a single round. Selvaratnam told the Committee of Inquiry that the navymen were in a state of shock.

By the time the navymen recovered, the 'terrorists' had vanished.

Tigers ran about 400 meters to board the "Mitsubishi Rosa" which was waiting for them. The mini bus sped towards Moolai. The Tigers had traveled to Ponnalai Causeway the previous night in that hijacked bus. They had escaped narrowly. If the naval ratings had fired, all would have been wiped out. The Committee of Inquiry said so to Selvaratnam. "If you had fired the LTTE would have been crippled," the inquiring officer chided Selvaratnam.

The LTTE's first landmine attack had failed. But it provided them the knowledge and experience to perfect landmines into the most deadly weapon in the LTTE's arsenal. The Tigers used the landmines with deadly effect. That made the media call the war, at one stage, the landmine war. The Tigers made use of the landmines to contain and subdue the Sri Lankan army.

That was a big miss for Sellakili also. The effort to make a massive impact on the government and the public had failed. But everything was not lost. The news was conveyed to President Jayewardene, who was staying in Jaffna Fort early that morning. He was upset. He summoned the National Security Council for a discussion about the landmine attack. Army Commander Tissa Weeratunga, Inspector General of Police Rudra Rajasingham, Northern Commander Brigadier Cyril Ranatunga, his assistant Major Balagalle, Captain Sarath Munasinghe, head of the army intelligence unit in Jaffna, and senior army and police officers stationed in Jaffna attended.

Jayewardene was angry. He scolded Munasinghe for the intelligence unit's failure to report on the resurgence of the LTTE. He asked Munasinghe: "Where is Pirapaharan?" Munasinghe replied: "In Madurai." He inquired about the persons responsible for the landmine attack and ordered: "We must nip this menace in the bud. Otherwise, we are in for trouble."

Jayewardene was not deterred by the hartal and the landmine attack. His election meeting was held that evening at the Jaffna esplanade. Gamini Dissanayake spoke before him. He concluded his speech saying, "Our leader will address you now. He will tell you an important matter."

Jayewardene spoke next. He started his speech saying that he was aware of the problems of the Tamil people. The problems had been identified through talks with the TULF. He had incorporated them in the 1977 election manifesto of the UNP. "We have started implementing the promises contained in the manifesto. We have laid the administrative framework for implementation by setting up the District Development Councils. My next task is to strengthen the District Development Councils. To do that I am seeking a fresh mandate," he said.

As arranged by EROS, a youth shot up. "You went on a pilgrimage opposing the Bandaranaike- Chelvanayakam Pact."

Jayewardene: "Yes I did. If any one tries to revive the pact, I will go on a pilgrimage to Kandy again."

Before Jayewardene could complete the answer, a group of EROS cadres cut the coir that tied the poles supporting the wooden planks that made the stage. The stage collapsed and with that, Gamini Dissanayake and President Jayewardene fell. His body did not suffer any physical injury. His heart did, however. The 79-year-old Jayewardene had never been so humiliated in his half-a-century political life. His determination to teach a lesson to the Tamils stiffened.

Chavakachcheri Police Attack

Though Jayewardene found fault with the army intelligence unit, it had been functioning efficiently since July 1981 when Brigadier Cyril Ranatunga took charge of the Jaffna command. He brought down Captain Sarath Munasinghe and organized the Intelligence Unit. The unit utilized captured senior members of PLOTE to gather information. Ranatunga was lenient to some of the detainees in return for information. At the time of Jayewardene's visit, three PLOTE seniors were kept in custody at the Gurunagar Camp. They were Anton, Aranganayagam and Arafat. They gave Sarath Munasinghe the details of all the murders and robberies in which they participated including the Kilinochchi Bank robbery. Ranatunga made use of them to fix up the garden in front of his official residence.



Gen. Cyril Ranatunge (ret'd.) in 2004

They escaped by climbing the wall of Ranatunga's residence on 26 October 1982 while doing gardening. Anton and Aranganayagam were arrested within three hours. The cordon and search operation carried out in Gurunagar failed to apprehend Arafat. Military officers held a lengthy planning session that night at Gurunagar camp and were about to break up. The time was 5.30 a.m. Then they received a police message that Chavakachcheri Police Station was under attack.

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They postponed their effort to re-arrest Arafat and rushed to Chavakachcheri. By the time they reached Chavakachcheri Police Station, 15 kilometers from Jaffna, the Tigers led by Seelan had completed the attack and escaped in the mini-bus they in which came. Police and army investigators later admitted it was a well planned and efficiently executed operation that took less than 15 minutes. Arafat was captured on 3 November when he boarded the Uthradevi evening express train at Meesalai bound to Colombo by soldiers traveling in it for their holiday. Anton, Aranganayagam and Arafat were killed on 25 July 1983 during the Welikada Prison massacre.

Chavakachcheri Police Station was a two-storey building. It is situated alongside the main Kandy Road. Following PLOTE's attack on the Anaikoddai police station on 27 July 1981, all main police stations were guarded day and night. On 27 October, night police constables Karunananthan and Kandiah were on guard duty. They had repeater shot guns.

Seelan had prepared the attack meticulously. He visited the police station twice and had observed the layout and the structure of the buildings. Through a civilian employee at the police station, he obtained the details about the locations of the armoury and communication equipment.



Class M4 no 756 "Laxapana" heads southbound Utara Devi at Kondavil, 1976.
Pic by M. Muthukumaraswamy

Uthradevi train, courtesy <http://www.gyan.doctors.org.uk/locojaffna2.htm>

"Before we set out on our mission to attack the police station we knew exactly all the details. We divided ourselves into groups of two and undertook to perform specific tasks. The task assigned to me and Shankar was to run to the living quarters which were at the back of the building and shoot the policemen there," Santhosam, who was from my village Ariyalai, told me when I met him subsequently. His father Kanapathipillai, a teacher, is a good friend of mine.

Seelan and Rahu formed one group. Their task was to shoot the police guards, destroy the communication equipment which was in the first storey, and shoot at the policemen who lived in the dormitory there. Santhosam and Shankar were to attack the residential quarters. Basheer Kaka and Mahattaya were detailed to break open the armoury and remove the arms. Pulenthiran and Aruna were to help in the carrying of the arms and the removal of the wounded to the mini-bus.

"We worked like a well oiled machine," recalled Santhosam. "We acted in unison."

Aruna and Pulenthiran arranged the mini bus, a Mitsubishi Rosa 29 Sri 7309, for the purpose. They met the driver, Thavarajah, in Kopay on 25 October and hired the bus for a trip to Thilayampalam Kovil on 27 October. They paid an advance of 100 rupees and asked Thavarajah to come to a house in Irupalai.

Thavarajah, who was arrested by the Army Intelligence Unit on 28 October, the day after the police station attack, told investigators he and his crew had been tied up when they went to the house by some youths and taken to a nearby house and locked up in a room. They were blindfolded, taken to Kopay and released in the night.

Eight Tigers traveled in the bus to Chavakachcheri. They were Seelan, Mahattaya, Aruna, Shankar, Pulenthiran, Rahu, Santhosam and Basheer Kaka. They were armed with one SMG, one G-3, one repeater rifle, two revolvers and grenades.

The mini bus approached the Chavakachcheri Police station around 5.30 am. The bus slowed down opposite the police station. Seelan and Rahu jumped out opening fire at the constables on guard duty. Karunanandan fell dead at the entrance. Kandiah retreated a few paces, got into a kneeling position and fired with his repeater shot gun. One of the Tigers who had run past him turned back and shot and killed him.

Seelan and Rahu ran to the first floor. They destroyed the communication equipment. Then they burst into the upstairs dormitory where six policemen lived. Seelan shot police driver Thilakarathne, whom he found hiding under his bed. Constable Jayatilleke, who jumped from the upper storey, broke his leg. Two constables hid themselves inside the toilet

and escaped. Another was fortunate because he went unnoticed though he was hiding under his bed. Constable Weerakoon, who had his revolver with him, took up position behind the door and opened fire when Seelan and Rahu ran down. He hit both of them. Seelan fell as a bullet tore his kneecap. Rahu's right hand bone was fractured.

Shankar and Santhosam sprinted to the living quarters at the back of the police station. They did that to scare the policemen away from protecting the armoury. They did not injure anyone as the constables hid themselves. Mahattaya and Basheer Kakka broke open the armoury and removed the weapons. Pulenthiran and Aruna, hearing gunshots and groans of pain from Seelan and Rahu, ran to help them. Aruna carried the fallen Seelan to the mini-bus. Pulenthiran was hit at the shoulder by a bullet Weerakkon fired.

The bold daybreak attack killed three policemen- Karunanathan of Uduvil, Kandiah of Mirusuvil and Thilaharatna of Kegalle - and wounded Sergeant Kandiah and Constable Jayatilleke and a civilian, Kandiah Selvam, who was in custody. The Tigers removed two sub machine guns, one .38 revolver, nine .303 rifles and 19 repeater shotguns.

The attack was over in 15 minutes. The attackers escaped in the mini bus they came in. It sped towards Meesalai and was found by the police abandoned at Navali.

Arrest of Singarayar

Before abandoning the mini bus, Mahattaya took it to Achchelu Methodist Church. He met the priest, Rev. Sam T. Jayathilakarajah. The injured men were taken to Jayathilakarajah's quarters behind the church. The others proceeded in the mini bus to the camp. They were dropped close to the camp and the mini bus was taken to Navali and left there.

Jayathilakarajah, realizing the seriousness of the situation, took the injured and Mahattaya in his car to Puttur Methodist Hospital where his brother, Dr. Jayakularajah, worked. The doctor advised Mahattaya the injured needed surgery and Seelan, who had lost a considerable amount of blood, needed constant care. Dr. Jayakularajah told Mahattaya five shotgun pellets had hit Seelan's right knee. He pointed to the three exit wounds and said three pellets had got out and the other two pellets were been embedded. They had to be removed by surgery. He also advised Mahattaya to take Rahu and Pullenthiran to the camp and said he would arrange for Seelan to be looked after by a family known to him. Seelan was kept in Dr. Jayakularajah's quarters after initial treatment and transferred to the house of the family known to him in the night.

The house to which Seelan was transferred was that of Nirmala Nithyananthan, at 330, Navalar Road, Jaffna. There were two houses in that compound, the main house at the centre of the large compound and a small house on a side. Nirmala, a lecturer at Jaffna University, and her husband, Muthispillai Nithyananthan, who was also a lecturer at the same university, lived in the small house. Nirmala's parents, the Rajasinghams, occupied the main house.



Jaffna University logo

Dr. Jayakularajah took Seelan to Nirmala's house in the night and told Nirmala, who called her younger sister, Rajani, a medical intern at the Jaffna Hospital, and instructed them about the dangerous state of Seelan's condition and the treatment. Seelan was stretched on the double bed the Nithyananthans used. He was still bleeding. Dr. Jayakularajah laid down another strict condition: No one other than him and Rajan should be allowed into the house. Rajan was none other than Mahattaya. Mahattaya was called Rajan in his young days. Mahattaya went to Nirmala's house by bicycle and took medicines and instructions from Dr. Jayakularajah.

Nirmala and Nithyananthan looked after Seelan like a member of their family. They sympathized with and adored him because of his childhood deprivations and his intense commitment to the freedom struggle. Seelan had told them the difficulties he had faced because of his drunken father and unemployed elder brother. He had told them that his mother was the only source of support and he regretted very much his leaving her. He also told them he was induced by Father Singarayar to join the LTTE. When Nirmala needed pain killers to administer to Seelan, Rajan obtained them from a dispensary through Father Singarayar.

Seelan had told Nirmala and her husband that he left home because dedicating his life to redeem the plight of the Tamil people was more worthy than improving the economic status of his family. He had told them he was fortunate to come under the influence of a noble leader like Pirapaharan. "Pirapaharan is a great leader," Seelan had told them.

Seelan had given an incident to illustrate Pirapaharan's greatness. One day, when a sick LTTE cadre wanted to vomit, Pirapaharan held his hands together for the sick person to vomit. When the cadre felt reluctant to vomit into his leader's hands Pirapaharan told him they were comrades and urged him to vomit into his hands.

Nirmala told this to Sarath Munasinghe, the head of the army intelligence unit stationed at Gurunagar who arrested her

and her husband for giving shelter to a 'terrorist' during the investigation. Munasinghe recorded this story in his book A Soldier's Version published in year 2000. Munasinghe requested me to read the final proof of his book and I made use of my meetings with him to do extensive interviews about the investigation he did on the Chavakachcheri Police Station attack, the raid he conducted at Meesalai which resulted in Seelan's death, and about the Thirunelveli attack. When Nirmala finished relating the vomiting incident Seelan had told her, Munasinghe said to her, "I will get hold of your Seelan one day." Nirmala retorted. "Please do not try that. You will never get him alive."



Maj. Gen. Sarath Munasinghe 2001

Munasinghe said they searched Nirmala's house on 20 November, two days after Seelan was transported safely to Tamil Nadu. He added that he came to know about Nirmala sheltering Seelan by accident. The army intelligence unit had received information that two Catholic priests, Father Singarayar and Father Sinnarasa, were actively helping the LTTE in propaganda work and in financial matters. Army intelligence officers and police detectives kept them under surveillance. After gathering 'hard' information, the army and the police sought permission from the defence ministry to search the churches where the priests served and their quarters. President Jayewardene was the defence minister and Weerapitiya his deputy. They decided not to be hasty, as that would create a furore among the Catholics. Lake House newspapers, mainly the *Daily News*, were used to create a favourable environment for the search.

The environment for the arrest was created systematically. First, the news was leaked that certain Catholic priests in the Jaffna peninsula were actively helping the LTTE. That was followed by news stories saying the army and the police were considering searching the churches and the living quarters of the priests. Statements and readers' letters were planted supporting the search and, if necessary, the arrest of priests. One letter said, "All persons, including priests, should be treated equally before the law."

Having created a conducive environment, the defence ministry gave the green light with the warning that the search and the arrest should be carried out without wounding the religious feelings of the Catholics. The army intelligence unit decided that Father Aparanam Singarayar's Church, "Amala Utpavam," at Kariyur, Jaffna should be searched first, and the search party should be led by a Christian officer. The only Christian officer serving in the intelligence field was an Assistant Superintendent of Police. He led the search party. Initially there were objections about the search, but it was carried out.

The army said it had found sufficient evidence to prove Fr. Singarayar's involvement with the LTTE. He was arrested on 14 November and taken to Gurunagar Camp for investigation. The next day, Fr. Philip Anton Sinnarasa's church, St. John's, Delft was searched and the priest arrested. He was also taken to the Gurunagar Camp.

These arrests sparked off protests. Thousands of students, priests and nuns took part in demonstrations, pickets and hunger strikes. The Bishop of Jaffna, Reverend V. Dogupillai, registered the strongest protest to the president.

Police detectives completed the recording of the statement of Fr. Singarayar on 18 November 1982. Munasinghe had a long discussion with Fr. Singarayar in the evening and the following day. Fr. Singarayar told Munasinghe about the problems of the Tamil people, the difficulties people living in rural areas face and the difficulties he faced during his young days. They went to their rooms around midnight.

The Vital Information

"The following morning, 20 November, Fr. Singarayar sent word for me. When I went, he was shivering. "I want to tell you something," he said. I calmed him down. He sat down on the chair. Then he held my hand tightly. Still he was shivering. "Seelan is being treated by Dr. Jayakularajah, brother of the Methodist priest, Rev. Jayathilakarajah," he said. I asked him their address and he gave it to me," Munasinghe told me.

"That was sufficient for me. That information was a real breakthrough," Munasinghe said. "I immediately drove to the Methodist Church at Achchelu with another officer and two soldiers. We were in civil clothes. Rev. Jayathilakarajah was not there. Then I drove to St. Luke's Methodist Hospital at Puttur. Dr. Jayakularajah was there. He was washing his car. He

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was disturbed when he saw us. 'Are you from the police?' he asked. 'We are from the army,' I replied. He looked frightened."

"I asked him straight," Munasinghe said, "Are you treating Seelan?"

He admitted it. He said he had gotten involved because of his brother, Rev. Jayathilakarajah.

Munasinghe asked, "Where is Seelan now?"

Dr. Jayakularajah: "He has been sent to India for treatment."

Munasinghe: "Other injured persons?"

Dr. Jayakularajah: "They too have been sent to India." He also gave their names as Ragu and Pulenthiran.

"Where did Seelan stay before he was transported to India?"

"At the house of a family known to me and sympathetic to the LTTE."

Munasinghe did not want to waste any more time with him. He decided to question the brothers together on that aspect. He instructed the other officer and one soldier to come in Dr. Jayakularajah's car to Rev. Jayathilakarajah's residence and drove in his jeep to the priest's quarters at Achchelu. When Munasinghe reached the priest's residence, which was behind the Church, he was there. Rev. Jayathilakarajah was shocked when Munasinghe told him that he was from the army.

"What brought you to me?" he asked.

Munasinghe: "Your involvement with the LTTE."

Rev. Jayathilakarajah denied having any link with the LTTE. He also denied that he had arranged for the treatment of the three injured Tigers. While they were arguing Dr. Jayakularajah arrived with the other army officer. He advised his brother to tell the truth.

"I have told them everything. You also tell the truth," the doctor advised his brother.

Then Rev. Jayathilakarajah told the truth. He said he had known Mahattaya and other LTTE leaders for some time and, when Mahattaya brought the injured to him, he persuaded his brother to treat them. He said his brother had sent Rahu and Pulenthiran to their camp and Seelan, who needed continued medical attention, to the house of a family known to him.

Munasinghe then questioned the brothers about the family that harboured Seelan. Rev. Jayathilakarajah revealed the name and address. He said the name of the family was Nirmala Nithiananthan and they lived in Nallur. Later he gave the address as 330, Navalar Road, Jaffna.

Munasinghe telephoned Gurunagar and requested reinforcements. Within 45 minutes, an officer and a group of commandos arrived in a jeep. Munasinghe took Rev. Jayathilakarajah with him to Nirmala's house. The priest was placed between the two soldiers in the back seat. The second jeep followed.

"I went ahead. When we reached Navalar Road, Rev. Jayathilakarajah showed me the house. I got down and opened the gate. I left it wide open to enable the commandos to rush in. I parked my jeep away from the gate, but closer to the small house. The commandos took some time to come. The commandos surrounded the house. A commando ran towards the rear of the small house. I followed him with my revolver in my hand. I noticed a person trying to escape from the rear of the smaller house. The commando opened up with his MP5A3 gun. I saw the escapee taking a shot or two, but he escaped," Munasinghe said.

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Chapter 31. The Death of the First Hero

To be posted February 20

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