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Pirapaharan 2, Chapter 1 Thirunelveli Attack

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published April 30, 2004



(Volume 2)

1. Thirunelveli Attack

The Ambush

Pirapaharan and his men alighted from the minibus which Sellakili parked along the crossroad that connected Point Pedro Road with Palaly Road. They walked up to the junction, in small groups of two or three, turned towards Jaffna and went a further 200 meters. They assembled opposite a boutique with a flat roof enclosed by a half wall and a projecting cement hood in front.

The time was around 9 p.m. Lights were on in some houses and an elderly gentleman opened the window and looked out hearing the sound of boots.

Victor placed the gunny bag he carried on the road, walked up to the window and shouted in Sinhala to close it. He also ordered residents to put off the light.

They obeyed. They were used to obeying such rude military orders. Soldiers on road-clearing operations, which precedes the passage of army convoys, issue such commands. Pirapaharan and his men were in army uniforms and the residents mistook them for soldiers.

Pirapaharan walked up to Sellakili and Victor and watched with satisfaction the burying of the landmines in the trench the telecommunication employees had dug to lay a cable on the boutique side of the road. He did not talk to them. He just watched. He then joined the other men, unwrapping the weapons they had brought in sacks.

Pirapaharan lifted the G3 deftly and fondly wiped off the dust. Others had SMGs and rifles.



H&K G3

All the top men of the LTTE of that time were there - Pirapaharan, Sellakili, Kittu, Victor, Pulenthiran, Iyer, Santhosam, Appaiah and others, fourteen of them. They divided themselves into two groups as Pirapaharan had planned.

Pirapaharan led one and Kittu the other.

The decision to stage the attack was taken by Pirapaharan. He told the others that the army should pay a heavy price for the death of Seelan. "Seelan's loss is irreplaceable. Yet, we must do something befitting Seelan. It should be done in a manner he would appreciate," Pirapaharan repeated to his colleagues since Seelan's death.

Pirapaharan told Anita Prathap in March 1984, about eight months after the Thirunelveli attack, in his very first interview to the media, that the ambush was partly a retaliation, a punishment to the army for the death of Seelan. Anita interviewed him in Chennai for *Sunday*, a political weekly published in Calcutta.

I copy Anita's question and Pirapaharan's answer for the record:

Q: Why did you stage the July ambush? There are various versions afloat. According to some, it was an act of reprisal as

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four Tamil women had been raped. Based on my investigations I felt that you had to prove a point to the Sinhalese army who were jubilant over the death of your close associate, Charles Anthony, leader of the military wing on 15 July. The point, I guess that you had to assert was that the LTTE, despite the loss of one of its ablest leaders was still strong and capable of taking on the Sinhalese army. Is this theory correct?

A: There is an element of truth in your findings about Charles Anthony and the ambush. The attack was partly retaliation, a punishment to the Sinhala army. But still, we feel that the lives of 13 soldiers cannot compensate the life of a great revolutionary and freedom fighter like Charles. The ambush was also a part of the guerrilla warfare directed against the enemy.

Anita's reference to the raping of four Tamil women was also a factor that angered the Tamil community in general and Pirapaharan in particular. On 22 July, a rumour said that a group of army men had abducted three Tamil girls in Jaffna and had taken them to their camp, gang-raped them and one of the girls had committed suicide.

Planning of the Thirunelveli ambush was left to Sellakili and Kittu. They decided that an attack on army's night patrol would be the most fitting tribute to Seelan, because he insisted in their internal discussions attack on the army was the best way to take forward the freedom struggle. An attack on the army would indicate to the Tamil people and the Sinhala state the growth of the growth of the guerrilla war.



The regular night patrol, a jeep and an army truck, always left Mathagal Army Camp after dusk and proceeded to Gurunagar Army Camp in Jaffna. The officer and the soldiers had their dinner in the Army Mess and started their return journey.

Sellakili and Kittu chose Thirunelveli, a village on the return route of the night patrol, to stage the attack for three reasons. Firstly, its location. It was about 2 kilometers outside Jaffna town and not crowded. It was also a built-up area providing a convenient environment to stage an ambush. In addition it had easy access and escape routes. Secondly, the time factor. The time the army patrol reached Thirunelveli junction was about midnight when the road is completely deserted. Thirdly, the most important reason, the trench dug to lay telephone cable served as a ready-made site to plant the landmines. The soldiers knew about the trench and would not look at it with suspicion.

Pirapaharan was pleased when he inspected the site. He praised Sellakili and Kittu for their choice. He told them that that was an ideal site for their purpose. The flat roof with half wall enclosure provided the ideal place for Sellakili, tasked with exploding the landmines, and Victor who assisted him, to lay in wait. The jasmine creeper, hanging from the hood, helped to hide the wires connecting the landmines to the exploder. And the boundary walls of the adjacent houses were ideally suited for ambush.

"We were all tensed up from the morning of the appointed day," Santhosam who hails from my village, Ariyalai, told me when I met him a few years later. Pirapaharan fixed 23 July 1983 night to carry out the attack. "I could not sleep the previous night. We were praying that it should succeed," he said.

The Thirunelveli attack was the LTTE's third landmine explosion and the second that combined landmine burst with ambush. Sellakili had mistimed the LTTE's first landmine explosion. The mines buried in the Ponnalai causeway were exploded ahead of time. The naval convoy was then about 100 meters away. The Umayalpuram attempt, the second, which combined a land mine explosion with ambush for the first time, was also mistimed. The landmines exploded about 50 meters in front of the truck. The driver braked the truck and the soldiers ran away after firing a few rounds. But the Tigers too had to flee, some abandoning their shoes, when an unexpected army convoy appeared. The Thirunelveli attack has to succeed, Pirapaharan kept telling his men.

Pirapaharan, an early riser, woke earlier than usual on 23 July, the appointed day. He went over the attack plan with Sellakili and Victor till he was fully satisfied.



Claymore Mine

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Sellakili and Victor buried two landmines two meters apart and connected them with wires to the exploder. They covered the landmines and the connecting wire with mud. They took the wire up to the roof camouflaged in the jasmine creeper. Sellakili and Victor climbed the roof and waited behind the half wall for the arrival of the army patrol. Pirapaharan and his men took up their position behind the boundary walls on both sides of the road.

Four Four Bravo

The army patrol codenamed "Four Four Bravo" left Mathagal Camp as usual. It reached Gurunagar Camp at about 8 p.m. It was led by Second Lieutenant Vaas Gunewardene of the First Battalion of Sri Lanka Light Infantry. His unit had been sent to Mathagal a week earlier.

Major Sarath Munasinghe, head of the Army Intelligence Unit of Jaffna was waiting to meet Gunawardene when he arrived in Gurunagar. Munasinghe told him that they had got a tip-off about an LTTE attack led by Sellakili in Jaffna town after midnight. Munasinghe was going to give the Tigers a surprise. He was taking a group of commandos to the city around midnight to patrol the town. He asked Gunawardene to leave the city limits before midnight.

The army and the police had built an intelligence network in Jaffna by early 1983. The joint unit that operated from Gurunagar Army Camp recruited the services of drop outs of militant movements. Munasinghe picked up a drunken youth near Tekkam in September 1982. The army detained him at the Gurunagar Army Camp. During investigations, he found that the youth had worked with the LTTE for some time before he dropped out. He knew most of the senior LTTE members, their family backgrounds and their houses. He knew Pirapaharan, Ragavan, Baby Subramaniam, Rajan, Ragu, Shankar and Pandithar.

The intelligence men utilized this youth's weakness - drinks and money - for their benefit. They named him Xavier. He was the person who identified Seelan's body in the mortuary. It was the same Xavier who tipped off military intelligence about Sellakili's plan for an attack on the army on the night of 23 July. He helped Munasinghe during investigations. He gave the directions to the houses of the LTTE seniors.

Munasinghe invited Gunewardene for a drink after informing him about the intelligence tip-off.

"What about a drink?" he invited Gunawardene.

"No. Thanks. I want to have a quick meal and depart," Gunawardene replied.

Gunawardene and his men had a quick dinner. Gunawardene then went to Munasinghe's room. He offered Munasinghe a Bristol cigarette and lit it with his blue gas lighter. He also smoked a cigarette and wished Munasinghe "Good night."

Gunawardene jumped into the front seat of the jeep driven by the army driver Private Manatunga and two soldiers got into the back seat. A company of ten soldiers boarded the truck. It was driven by army driver Corporal Perera. The patrol leisurely went to the Jaffna market, Naga Vihare where it stopped for a few minutes and proceeded to Urmpirai through Nallur and Kopay. From Urmpirai Gunawardene contacted the radio room at Gurunagar and filed his report.

"Four Four Bravo," he reported. "Everything normal. It's quiet. We are now going back to our camp"

The patrol then proceeded along the normal return route - Kondavil, Kokuvil, Thirunelveli and Mathagal.

Sellakili and Victor were standing on the roof watching the road intently. They could hear the noise of the approaching vehicles. Then they spotted the headlights. Sellakili held the exploder firmly. It was one of the four exploders Seelan had stolen from the KKS Factory. That was Seelan's last daring act of bravery. The LTTE was going to take revenge on the army with the very exploder Seelan had stolen.

They heard a soft whistle which signaled the start of the operation.

Sellakili pressed the switch of the exploder. Both landmines went off almost simultaneously. It was a thundering explosion. It was heard over a distance of three to four kilometers. Army officers in the Gurunagar Camp heard the sound loud and clear.

The front landmine exploded while the jeep was over it. The jeep was thrown up and fell in the middle of the road on its side. Kittu told the Tamil magazine *Devi* that the jeep was blown up to the height of a tall coconut tree. The rear land mine exploded a few meters in front of the truck. The driver applied the brake and it stopped just in front of the crater. Both mines created huge craters.



Claymore explosion

The occupants of the jeep were thrown out. The body of Manatunga, the driver, was found on the driving side of the jeep. The body of Gunewardene was thrown a few meters away from the road. The bodies of the other two were found behind jeep. Their bodies were badly damaged. Their death was instantaneous.

Pirapaharan and his men opened fire from both sides of the road on the men in the truck. They jumped out of the truck. Most of them fell dead.

Brigadier Lyle Balthazaar, Jaffna Army Commander and Munasinghe heard the explosion. This is what Munasinghe told me in an interview,

"I had my dinner and went to my room. It was next to the dining hall. I was in my bed when I heard the explosion. It was in the direction of the Nallur Temple. The time was about 11.20 p.m. I jumped out of my bed. Just then Balthazaar tapped at my window and called me to come out. We ran to the radio room. We made several attempts to contact the mobile patrol. There was no response.

"We ran to my jeep which was kept in readiness for the midnight operation. I started it. Balthazaar hopped into the front seat. Some commandos jumped into the back seat. Two or three vehicles followed ours. Senior police officers traveled in a double cab. I drove furiously along the Jaffna-Palaly road. Just before the Thirunelveli junction I saw an army jeep lying on its side."

The loss of Sellakili

The Tigers had left by the time Munasinghe reached the scene of the attack. They walked carrying the weapons they had taken from the soldiers. It was a victory procession. Pirapaharan walked in front. Others followed in single file. They walked up to the junction and turned towards the minibus.

Pirapaharan and his men functioned like a well-oiled machine. Every one did his part well. They had no time to waste. They wanted to make a quick exit. They knew the army and the police would rush to the scene. They would seal off all escape routes.

The group gathered near the minibus. Pirapaharan was pleased. He was excited. He was thrilled. He thanked everyone for a deed efficiently executed. He thanked Sellakili for the excellent timing of the explosion.

Kittu noted that the hero of the operation was missing.

"Where is Sellakili Annan?" Kittu shouted.

Sellakili was older than most of the others. He was treated with respect. They called him Annan (elder brother).

He was not there.

Victor ran back to the boutique. He climbed the roof. Sellakili's body was there; bleeding. A bullet had pierced his chest.

How did that happen? No one knew. There were only conjectures.

When the army truck screeched to a halt, soldiers jumped out of it. Most of them were shot dead by the Tigers. Most of the soldiers were hit on their heads. But one soldier crawled under the truck and fired furiously all-round. Sellakili must have stood up thinking the attack was over and received a bullet fired by the soldier hiding under the truck. Death was instantaneous.

Victor lifted Sellakili's body, put it across his shoulder, and ran to the minibus. Santhosam described the scene to me thus:

"We were all shocked when Victor appeared with Sellakili's body on his shoulder. Blood was streaming from Sellakili's chest. It had drenched Victor's military uniform."

The sight was touching. It transformed the entire scene. Hilarity vanished. Pirapaharan fell silent. So did others. Victor took Sellakili's body to the back seat. Solemnly he stretched it out and then closed Sellakili's eyes. Others piled the captured weapons at Sellakili's feet, on the floor. That was the moving tribute we paid to the fallen hero. The scene was sentimental," Santhosam said.

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It began to drizzle as the minibus sped towards the hideout at Atchchveli. Pirapaharan got down first. As his feet touched the ground, he wailed. Others joined him. The feeling they had controlled with difficulty burst. Kittu described this touching scene in his interviews and articles to Tamil papers. He has said that was the first time he saw Pirapaharan cry.



Sellakilli Memorial 2003 Thirunelveli

Sellakili's death was the second major blow to the LTTE in the brief period of nine days. Seelan died on 15 July. And Sellakili on 23 July. Seelan was the de facto second in command of the LTTE and Sellakili ranked almost next to him. Sellakili's real name was Sathasivam Selvanayagam. He was from Kalviyankadu, a suburb of Jaffna town on the Jaffna-Point Pedro Road.

The Shocking Sight

For Munasinghe and other military and police officials what they saw at the scene of the attack was shocking. Twelve bodies of soldiers were scattered around the jeep and the truck. Three of them were around the jeep. A fourth was a few meters away on a side of the road. Munasinghe suspected that to be the body of Vaas Gunawardene. He turned the face up and it was Gunawardene's. It had a gaping hole just above the right ear. His packet of Bristol cigarettes and the blue-coloured lighter were later found inside the jeep. The truck stood about 25 meters behind the jeep. Eight bodies were scattered around it.

They heard a soldier screaming under the truck. Soldiers pulled him out. One of his legs and an arm were broken. They identified him as Sergeant Thilakaratne. He was sent to Jaffna Hospital, but died on the way.

A while later another soldier, Lance Corporal Sumathipala, came limping from the garden of an adjoining compound. He told the officers that he jumped from the truck with others and ran into the compound, climbed the roof of the house and fired at the attackers. His story was not believed.

Corporal Perera also survived the ferocity of the Tiger attack. With an injured leg, he had run to the Kondavil Depot of the Sri Lanka Transport Board and used its telephone to inform the Palaly Army Camp about the incident. But Balthazaar, Munasinghe and others were at the scene of the blast before Perera's telephone message.

The army and police officers dispatched the bodies of the 12 victims - one officer and 11 soldiers - to the Jaffna hospital. They removed the damaged jeep and the truck to the Gurunagar Army Camp. They placed a cordon around the scene of the attack and left for their camp.


The Thirunelveli ambush changed the course of Sri Lankan history. It also altered the course of the history of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Above all it changed the character of the freedom struggle of the Sri Lankan Tamils. It pushed the LTTE to the forefront.

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Chapter 2, The Jaffna Massacre

To be published May 5

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