

The magnificent marines

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By Dishan Joseph

Spectrum



Landing from small craft

'A good navy is not a provocation to war, but the surest guarantee of peace' - President Theodore Roosevelt

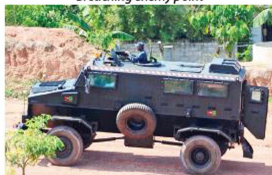
Being an island nation maritime security is of paramount importance to Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Navy continues its task to be the first line of defence. In enhancing its amphibious combat capabilities the Navy takes pride in their Marine Battalion which has been in existence since 1917. The history of the naval infantryman dates back to the early 1980s. The Patrolman Branch was originally entrusted with the task of guarding the piers and other launching platforms of the naval fleet. As the threat of terrorism increased during the period of conflict the need for a formidable naval infantry unit was envisaged by the late Commander, Shanthi Bahar, along with a few sailors. During 1991 the naval infantry did commendable service at Karainagar, rendering support in Operation Balavegaya (1991), Pooneryn (1993) Mullaithivu (1996) and Operation Jayasikuru in 1997. The valiant naval infantrymen expanded into a formidable fighting force and fought on par alongside the Army on the ground. This was the turning point in their combat capability which would lay the foundation for the Marine force later on. Two of the pioneers who made the Marine Battalion a reality were Vice Admiral Ravi Wijegunaratne (present Admiral, Chief of Defence Staff) and the then Director General Operations Rear Admiral Piyal De Silva (now Vice Admiral and incumbent Navy Commander). Vice Admiral Piyal de Silva is a veteran in asymmetric warfare and has many amphibious landings to his credit. Since then the Marines continue to consolidate their presence within the overall defence infrastructure.



Engaging in urban warfare



Breaching enemy point



Mechanized convoy

The training school of the Marines is located at Sampur, in Trincomalee. It is in a hot and humid landscape. The acting director of the Marines is Captain Sanath Pitigala, who counts 29 years of naval service. He explained, "Fighting at sea is one dimension of naval warfare. But an amphibious beach landing under direct enemy fire is another realm of survival. We have to hold the beaches until replenishment troops arrive. Every Marine must be fit and focused on the task". The Marine Battalion functions under the Director General Operations - Navy Head Quarters and the Commandant Naval Infantry. Those of us familiar with World War 2 movies will remember the massive amphibious beach landings by the Allies in Normandy during Operation Overlord and the Allies' invasion of the Japanese shore of Iwo Jima. Our Marines are trained and engage in a similar manner. Officers of the Executive and Patrolman Branches can volunteer to join the Marines as core combatants, after completion of their Sub-Lieutenant technical course. Officers from other branches can also take up this challenge.

Sailors must complete their basic naval training and then volunteer for this elite force. Prospective candidates face a tough selection process that includes swimming and physical endurance.

Once enlisted for training they have to undergo seven months of training - divided into initial, intermediate and final phase. New recruits begin their boot camp at 5.30 am. Physical training is carried out in half battle dress (wearing boots) up to 7.30am when they stop for breakfast, and thereafter the men attend classes or sessions of field training. Training is very close to real life situations. Beach landings are often wet and tiring moments, as sailors have to jump from a landing craft - carrying their weapons and ammunition. When salt water gets into your boots you have to remain with it for many hours. Lunch is served at 1pm and classes begin again at 2 pm and wind up by 4 pm. Marines are taught to operate in 'firemen' teams - a small element of four men. This progresses to a squad, platoon and finally an entire battalion of almost 600 combat ready Marines. The Chinese General Sun Tzu said, "Treat your men like your own sons and they will follow you into the deepest valley"- this is visible in the team spirit and camaraderie of the Sri Lankan Marines.

Captain Pitigala added, "Physical endurance is key in our training. We often give our trainees only five hours of sleep, we strain them out to breaking point. It is then that they discover their own weakness and strength. They can soon focus and be mission ready in every terrain and dangerous situation. For the trainees jumping from landing craft is a new experience. We also do some training with our Special Boat Squadron (SBS) to enrich their training. The SBS specializes in clandestine inductions into enemy territory. They move in first, prior to a beach landing and gather vital information and then we come in for the aggressive sea borne assault. The Marines can individually qualify and become snipers, sky divers, combat riders, BSW (battalion support weapons) and EOD (explosive ordnance disposal). We even train them on how to deal with poisonous snakes - which is taught by the Army Commando Regiment. Our missions take us into jungle territory where we encounter tropical snakes."

Weeks into their training Marines are taught martial arts, unarmed combat and plans are being made to introduce Krav Maga - the fighting art form of Israel. The naval infantrymen also learn the skill of VBS - vessel boarding and search at sea. Sailors learn to fire the M-16 assault rifle, Uzi gun, Light Machine Gun and grenade launches. The men learn the art of MOUT- military operations in urban terrain. During their training they are fed on a high protein diet.

On completion of the training they partake in a passing out parade donning their blue camouflaged uniforms. Some Marines were able to take part in the RIMPAC - amphibious exercise where 22 nations united together for an extensive training. At present training is being conducted on mechanized convoy tactics. As most of the Marines are seamen, handling boats comes naturally to them.

The Navy has a hover craft - that can rapidly facilitate amphibious landings, as the craft moves on an air cushion carrying 35 armed men. Marines have taken part in flood rescue missions and also in riot control duties to sustain law and order.

Future plans include enhancing knowledge of inland water operations and training for UN peacekeeping missions. The training school at Sampur transforms sailors into magnificent fearless Marines. The Marines are primed and ready to safeguard our island nation. They are the gallant masters of amphibious assault.