

## Anuradhapura Air Base attack: The full story



- **Attack on Air Base makes mockery of govt's propaganda war**
- **The base had no contingency plan**

The Sri Lankan Government's propaganda war which used impressive slogans like 'liberating the eastern province', 'sinking floating warehouses', 'restricting the Tigers to the Wannu' and 'crushing terrorism outside the north and east' was made a futile exercise by a team of 21 members of the Black Tiger killer Squad of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and two dual engine light aircraft that changed the entire situation in one night.

Coming out of their hideout the Tiger team carried out a devastating attack on the highly fortified air base of the Sri Lanka Air Force at Anuradhapura early morning on Monday.

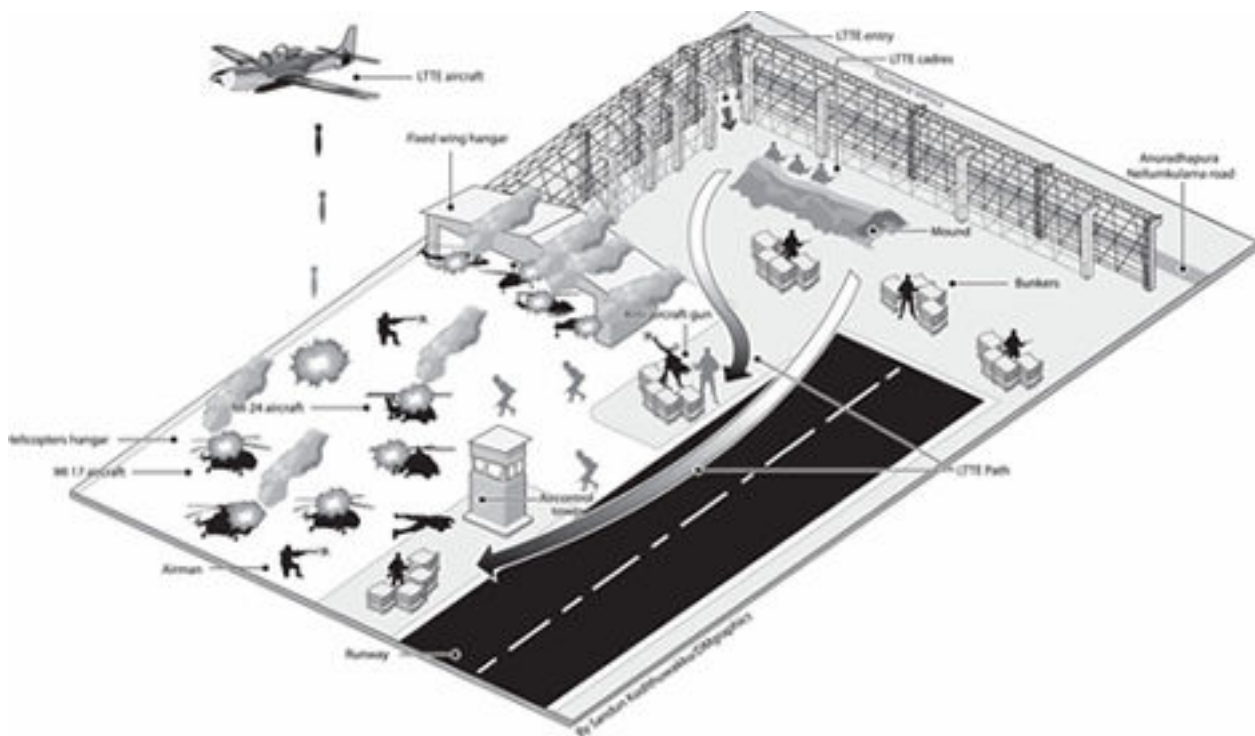
Embarking on the first such attack in the world by a terrorist organisation, the LTTE launched a 'Commando Style' operation against a professional force placing the Government in a very embarrassing situation.

During this attack, which resulted in the virtual control for over seven hours of the strategically crucial air base, the Black Tigers destroyed more than 80 percent of the assets of the base's hanger including a multi-million dollar Beechcraft surveillance aircraft.

The Anuradhapura Base acts as one of the main bases in forward operations for military activities in the North. This base is located about four kilometers away from the Sacred City of Anuradhapura on the banks of the scenic 'Nuwarawewa'. In an environment of peace, the airfield and associated infrastructure at SLAF Anuradhapura plays a significant role in facilitating the passage of air traffic in this region. Considered as one of most protected air bases, it housed the SLAF's main pilot training school, 9th Attack Helicopter Squadron, 6th Helicopter Squadron, 1st Flying Training Wing, 7th Helicopter Squadron, 11th Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Flight etc.

The air base was also providing intelligence support to the SLAF and the Navy through the sophisticated Beechcraft plane fitted with equipment for aerial photography and the collection of electronic and technical intelligence and unmanned drones. Most of the time, instructors from Pakistan, China and Israel were periodically visiting the base to carry out training of newcomers.

On the night of the Gajaba super cross - 2007 that was held the previous night at the Saliyapura Super cross track, in Anuradhapura a function was held with the participation of most of the area senior military officers and other ranks as well as competitors with their relatives and friends at the Saliya Pura Army Camp, which is located near the Anuradhapura SLAF base.



Meanwhile most of the staffers at the base were reportedly watching a popular music competition on TV, while others were reportedly listening to the programme. While these distractions were taking place, a team sent by LTTE's Spy Chief Pottu Amman waited in a coconut estate, adjoining the base until the green light came from their leadership in Kilinochchi and also till the activities in the base had quieted down.

The team was equipped with modified T-56 automatic guns, hand grenades, LAWs (Light Antitank Weapon), Multi-Purpose Machine-Gun (MPMG), Lightweight Machine Guns (LMG), seven satellite phones, knives etc.

The LTTE squad, comprising mostly of the cadres from east and three females entered from the northern edge of the base after crossing the Anuradhapura-Nelunkulama road. Around, 2.30 am the Tigers cut off the first steel-net that goes around the entire outer perimeter of the base. A few feet away from this protective net, within the base too there is a similar kind of protective steel net going around it parallel to the first net. However in between these two nets is a smaller electrically charged net. The electrified net however apparently was at this time not connected to the electricity supply and this allowed the Tiger team to easily enter through the fence lines. The questions that are now important are how this lapse occurred and who was responsible? Was it purposely done or was it an oversight?

Once the team infiltrated on the premises, they had removed the sound mines that lay on the ground between the runway and the fences. The sound mines are laid vertically towards the closest bunker. On either side of the path, mines had been laid with explosives that could badly wound or kill anyone who stepped on them.

However the LTTE team had systematically removed the sound mines and reached a mound just behind the first row of the bunker lines, in which air force personnel had been deployed.

Once the Black Tiger team took cover behind the mound, a group of them went in front of the corner bunker by rolling quietly towards the runway, while another group moved in between the corner and second bunkers. Three of the cadres remained behind the mound in order to prevent the airmen, if they tried to attack the moving cadres in front. However, it is surprising that no air force personnel in these bunkers noticed the moving LTTE cadres, which the investigators now believe was due to the fact that they were most probably asleep.

Accordingly, the first team comprising 14 cadres tasked to neutralize the bunkers reached to the Helicopter Hangar area, while the others waited to enter into fixed wing hangars and destroy them.

As the first team reached the runway, the second team also commenced moving towards the 'V area' in the air base where two Mi-24 gunship and troops carrier Mi-17 helicopters were parked. Once the two teams reached the runway, the three cadres, who were behind the mound opened fire at the bunker lines killing those who were there and then, joined the other team.

The time was almost 3.20 am. The entire air base by now knew that some attack was taking place due to the sound of automatic rifle fire exchange and the entire base was put on red alert. With firing started the LTTE neutralized the first line of the bunkers that were there to protect the hangers of the fixed wing air craft and the helicopters, which were located near the air force base's air control tower.

Near the tower there was a 12.7 Anti-Air Craft gun along with a gunner. After a few minutes of heavy exchange of fire, the intruders took control of that gun and also neutralize communication, radar and an anti-aircraft gun position of the base.

But before they did this the Tigers had shot at several airmen including Officer Command Air defence System at the Base Flight Lt. Ruwan Kumara Wijeratne. He was just under the air control tower and was attempting to reach for a gun in order to stop the enemy movement when he was hit on his stomach by the shooting and fell. It was later revealed that he had died due to heavy bleeding. In the meanwhile, the radar system at Vavuniya and Bandaranaike International Air Port in Katunayake, captured movements of two unidentified flying objects, which were moving towards Vavuniya. After confirming that it was the Tigers air craft, electricity had been shutdown in Colombo, Vavuniya and Anuradhapura. It was around 4.10 am, the two air craft flew towards Anuradhapura over Vavuniya. It is however unlikely that the anti aircraft guns were activated through Vavuniya to Anuradhapura, and the two air craft safely reached the air base and dropped at least three bombs. One bomb fell near the helicopter hangar, but no damage was done to the air craft, the second fell near the Saliyapura army Camp, but no damage was done, while the third fell on to a farm with buffalos just outside the air force base. Later it was revealed that 12 of buffalos were killed due to the bombing.

In Colombo, Air Force Commander Roshan Goonetilake and Director Operations Air Commodore Harsha Abeywikrame were already in the Operation room at the Air Force Headquarters in Colombo. With the detection of the two LTTE air craft, the Vavuniya Helicopter Squadron was ordered to track down the two Tiger air craft.

Squadron Leader Amila Mohotti and pilot officer A.B.M de Silva, along with two gunners, took off in a Bell 212 from the Vavuniya base. Their main task to bring down the two enemy craft as soon as possible.

The Bell 212 was on its way towards the Anuradhapura area as the two enemy craft were already over the Anuradhapura sky. At this time, instructions had been given to all the ground

troops in Vavuniya and Anuradhapura to bring down the LTTE air craft. But around 4.30 am, the Bell helicopter had crashed at Doramadawala area some 15 km from Anuradhapura and within a few minutes exploded.

It is reliably learnt that the helicopter was hit by ground troops as they appeared to have mistakenly identified it as one of enemy air craft. It is also learnt that once the helicopter was hit by a ground bullet, it had informed the Vavuniya base. The matter is now under investigation.

By then the two Tiger air craft passing over Vavuniya disappeared from the radar monitor and returned to its jungle hideout in Kilinochchi, completing yet another mission.

Meanwhile on ground, with the capture of the Anti-Air Craft gun, the LTTE fired towards the hangars of the fixed wing aircraft and also at the helicopters, while they also continued firing at air force personnel around the area.

Six LTTE cadres had captured two bunkers and fired at the troops, while, the others destroyed the aircrafts one by one. During this battle, the Tigers had also blown up SLAF's second main fire service station inside the base.

While the heavy confrontation continued, Anuradhapura SLAF Base Commander Group Captain Priyantha Gunasinghe informed the Vavuniya Special Forces Commander Maj. Gen. Upali Edirisinghe to immediately dispatch a team to bring the situation under control. In the meantime, soldiers of the nearby Gajaba Regiment also came to the assistance. By this time a few of the LTTE cadres had also been killed and many were injured, but fighting continued.

The Tigers had also succeeded in blowing up the Beechcraft, and few other helicopters. Unable to control the situation, around 7 am, a Special Forces contingent led by Major Chandimal Peiris and Captain Kosala Munasinghe took over the task and around 11 am, they able to completely take control of the base after killing the 21 LTTE cadres. Later it was found that six of the cadres had blown up themselves.

It is reported that the LTTE cadres had constant contact with Kilinochchi Headquarters through satellite phones till around 10.30 am. The security forces later found two Tamil Eelam flags.

During the attack 13 air force personnel, including four officers and one soldier were killed and eight air craft were completely destroyed- Two Mi-24 helicopter gunship (9th Attack Helicopter Squadron), a Mi-27 transport helicopter (6th Helicopter Squadron), K-8 and PT6 trainer jets (1st Flying Training Wing), Cessna 150 aircraft (1st Flying Training Wing), a Beechcraft 200 HISAR, a Bell 212 fitted with guns (7th Helicopter Squadron) and at least two UAVs (11th UAV Flight) were completely destroyed.. However another ten air crafts, including three of PT-6 Trainer air craft, K-8 advanced Jet trainer and Cessna training air craft were also damaged.

A few hours after the attack, the LTTE claiming the responsibility released the personal particulars of the 21-Black Tiger team. Two Lieutenant-Colonels, six Majors, 12 Captains and one Lieutenant ranked Black Tiger members took part in the operation. A Lieutenant-Colonel who led an attack team was from Trincomalee, two of the members, a Major and a Captain, were from Batticaloa, one from Mullathivu, one from Mannar, three from Kilinochchi and eleven members from Jaffna .Three Captains were women.

This operation appeared to have been launched by the LTTE in retaliation of the recent operations of the Sri Lankan Navy against the transport ships of the LTTE and the air strikes of the SLAF over LTTE positions in the Northern Province.

After hearing the news, President Rajapaksa immediately summoned the security council, which was attended by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the Air Force Commander, Chief of Defence Staff Donald Perera, IGP Victor Perera and several defence ministry officials. Army Commander Sarath Fonseka and Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda were not in the country. It is learnt that the President had been critical of the Air Force Chief and his men, and directed the Defence Secretary to visit the area immediately.

On the same evening, Secretary Gotabaya toured the base along with the Police Chief and the Air Force Commander. After seeing the devastating scene at the base, the Secretary immediately ordered the Army to take charge of all Air Force bases in the country. However later after discussion with the Army Commander over the phone, the President appointed GOC II Division at Panagaoda Major General Sanath Karunaratne as the Overall Operational Commander in Anuradhapura.

On the same day, the two Air Force teams headed by Air Force Chief of Staff Air Vice Marshal M. Premachandra commenced their investigations into the attack and Bell 212 crash.

### **Loopholes**

It is revealed that the base had no contingency plan to meet such an emergency situation, as the base authorities had not carried out any rehearsal or mission oriented training in order to protect the camp. The air force personnel, who were providing security at that time were never given any military training to meet such an emergency. Accordingly, there should be well-trained teams deployed in the camp around the clock in order to protect such a base.

The other important issue was that, the base didn't have any outer fences to defend localities of the base. The defended localities include lands around the base which should be free of civilian movement.

It is also revealed that, in the Anuradhapura area, the intelligence gathering was in a poor stage as there was no proper leadership to strengthen the military or police intelligence in the area.

### **Tigers are weak, not their terrorism**

On the next day morning, Government Defence Spokesman Minister Keheliya Rambukkwella said that 'the LTTE is now desperate due to the liberation of the East and the pressure building up in the North that they resort to uplifting their image by this type of attack.'

But killing a few thousands cadres, and capturing some land and recovering some heavy weapons will not weaken the Tigers, because they are a terrorist outfit. They just need one well trained suicide cadre and a lorry with bombs

It is true that due to the recent military accomplishments they are at the receiving end. But this doesn't mean that LTTE is disabled. They are losing their de-facto state but not their terrorist capabilities.

This attack is a definite morale booster for the cadres and the Tamil Diaspora.

