

Emerging Out Of The Shadows

Posted on



Farah III stands as a reminder...

An entire generation was lost in Sri Lanka during the 30-year long conflict that ravaged our nation. And, many of us are still scarred by the violence that ripped through our day-to-day lives. Usually the month of November is a time of extra vigilance and security; it is the month that the LTTE commemorated their Mahaveer Day, which was usually celebrated with the massive destruction of life and property... a bomb, a claymore... Three years have passed since the end of the conflict where our Armed Forces were able to relieve the people of this country regardless of whether they were Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim, Burgher or other from the clutches of terrorism. Their sacrifices have not been in vain, we are able to travel to any part of the country today. There is peace and security. We are a free people... a free nation.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

We caught a glimpse of what life was during the time of the LTTE. It was only a glimpse but it left a lasting impression. Shadows of the past lingered at every corner we looked. It was an inexplicable feeling that sent shivers down our spines.

We stepped on to the soft reddish soil of Mullaitivu. We were at the memorial erected in honour of the valiant Sri Lankan troops who had laid down their lives while defending the Mullaitivu camp that was overrun by the LTTE in 1996. It was a stark reminder of the lives lost and blood shed in this war. We forget at times how life was prior to May 2009.

This was a journey that stirred many emotions. My thoughts are not in a particular order, because my memories are a blur...

We were at Nandikadal Lagoon and driving on the Wadduwakal Causeway, more than 100,000 of our country's people crossed this causeway, fleeing misery looking for hope and security. Now, the waters of the Nandikadal flow freely just like the people... who pause to let us pass.

Skeletons of burnt vehicles lined the road, it was never ending...buses, cars, motorcycles, lorries and bicycles all destroyed by the LTTE to prevent the Sri Lanka Army from capturing them. Ultimately it is the owners of these vehicles that lost their hard earned money. However, people are returning to claim what is their own. Houses were being renovated and families that had left were returning to their own land. When they were fleeing they had buried their valuables in a place that only they knew. We were happy to see many of them digging their land to recover what was rightfully theirs. They did not have to be afraid because the LTTE was no more to exhort from them.

The Jordanian vessel - Farah III - stands on the shores of Vellamulla Vaikkal, massive and breathtaking. The LTTE had captured this vessel in December 2006 while it had been anchored off the shores of Mullaitivu. Its metal had been used to build submarines and other destructive appliances, it is said that the LTTE radio, Tiger Voice had been stationed here. However, Farah III is symbolic in our history as it is here that the historical link between the Northern and Southern formations of the Sri Lanka Army were made signifying the end of the conflict.

Pudumathalan, we were at the Sea Tiger boat yard, which had been converted into

a museum. There were small and medium sized submarines, suicide boats and larger boats. Vessels used for intelligence gathering and for movement undetected... I was amazed that a person could even fit into some of these vessels. All had been acquired or manufactured to create destruction. Most of the vessels as well as the guns and explosive devices had been manufactured by the LTTE using material that had been brought down from abroad. Makes one wonder why they could not use these skills and resources for life rather than death, when the people of this area was suffering under their rule. RPGs, mortars, johnny buttas, baba mortars and the list goes on...

Remains of the LTTE aircraft that was shot down before it could reach Colombo were also kept at this location. There was no refined finish to any of the products that they had manufactured. Everything was so raw... Large devices made of steel and metal had been used by the LTTE to produce bombs and other explosives. Each machine had its own function and created a single component that when combined creates destruction.

Walking around the yard we were curious to see two cage like contraptions; one was a large square, the other was slimmer and rectangular in shape. We soon realised that these were where prisoners were held, large groups and lone prisoners respectively. There was barb wire all around the two cages and in the smaller one the prisoner could only face one direction as there was no room to even move. We shuddered as images of captives came into our minds.

[A large unfinished submarine was on one side and its testing pool on the other](#)

At Kovil junction (Kovil Handiya) we turned towards Chalai, this area was formerly known as the Sea Tiger stronghold. A large unfinished submarine was on one side and its testing pool on the other. The submarine consisted of massive steel rings; this was built apparently to crash into large vessels. Though the submarine was large, the area for actual passengers was really small. The testing pool was facing the sea and there was a movable contraption to open and close, to fill the pool with water. The distance from the submarine to the testing pool was somewhat long, where the submarine cannot be carried to the testing pool but had to be transported using a vehicle.

[We gasped in astonishment... the pool was massive. Built in 2001, the pool is 82ft in length and 22ft in depth. There were four levels creating giant size steps](#)

Many of us have heard about the LTTE swimming pool, well that was our next stop. We walked through a densely grown forest and passed a children's playground with a bus as a slide. A few steps further, and we gasped in astonishment... the pool was massive. Built in 2001, the pool is 82ft in length and 22ft in depth. There were four levels creating giant size steps. It is said that Sea Tiger divers were trained here and that Prabakaran himself came here for a swim. Luxury personified, while the innocent man suffered. The sheer size of the pool is etched in mind. The pool had been covered with camouflage material so that no aircraft could detect it. Actually, that was a common aspect anywhere in the former LTTE areas where there was good canopy or jungle cover to hide whatever activities that were happening on the ground.

Soosai, the Leader of the Sea Tiger wing of the LTTE, lived in a highly residential area in Puthukuduirippu called Kumbavil. It is a bit difficult to find as you have to navigate through many lanes. There is a ground in the middle and once you cross it you arrive at Soosai's house. Vendors have taken up shop and sell sweets, drinks and other items to visitors. We entered from the side entrance. The single storey house is of the characteristic architecture of the Wanni region. The peach/pink shade of the house was somewhat faded but the house was in good condition. The ceiling of the portico had a bright pink flower. It was striking. The sitting room was large and spacious and fully tiled. The pantry was well planned and airy. The corridor led out to the outdoor kitchen. One bedroom was with an attached toilet, and the other, which is said to have been the bedroom of Soosai has a built in cupboard and an altar for the Gods.

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Guess our surprise when we opened the door of the cupboard? It was the entrance to the underground bunker!!! Anyone entering the room would think it is just a cupboard. Outside there is another smaller building; it is said that this was the accommodation for Soosai's security detail, they too had another bunker where the entrance and exit were both outside. The garden is large and would have been well kept. There is a place where a large iron safe with a large quantity of gold had been buried. It could be said that Soosai lived in an affluent area as all the houses in the vicinity are large. It is an inexplicable feeling to stand in the house of a person who had destroyed so many lives. It seemed like the LTTE leaders lived a life of luxury, and the people?

It was getting dark and there was one more place to visit for the day... We passed the 'central' roundabout in the Mullaitivu Town and drove along the straight road. We turned off into a side road and drove for a while. The jungle thickened and amidst the forest we could just make out a building. We had arrived at Prabakaran's residence in Mullaitivu...

The compound is said to be massive, we had seen only a small part of it

It was quite apparent that this compound had been heavily fortified. It consisted of seven security rings and his security consisted of 2,500 Black Tigers. We were at the centre. The first building we passed as we walked towards the main house, was a place where Prabakaran paid his respect to the dead. The roof was in the shape of a coffin and the gate had the drawing of the land mass that they wanted to lay claim to.

It was getting dark, and the trees were creating shadows... the shadows of the past were definitely lingering here. The next building was the underground carport for Prabakaran's vehicle, its entrance was camouflaged and for a person who does not know, it would seem as if the vehicle disappeared underground! Slowly...slowly we walked towards the house. There was a large central living space, with a large side room with an attached bathroom. Our guide took us through to the staircase and our descent began...

The first level consisted of a conference room. The room was not very large, maybe it could accommodate about 20 people without any furniture. The walls and ceiling were of heavy concrete. The entire underground bunker had been air conditioned. The room where Prabakaran had stayed was also there, it had a low ceiling and it seemed as if the room had been made to fit him. Through a grill partition we went to the next level. All the doors were of pure steel and as such were bullet proof. The doors could only be locked from the inside, thereby preventing anyone from coming in. Each floor had a small open area, which led into the main room of the particular floor. We were now inside the Operations Room. It is said that Prabakaran met only his closest aides at his house. The walls were about four and a half feet thick. It was quite hot and humid within, I could just imagine how the place would have been with air conditioning. The Ops Room wall was covered with a wooden frame. We were told that the maps of all the areas were put on the walls and it was within this room that many attacks and strategies were formulated. We were quite curious to see a small opening on the floor, this was an escape route in case of an attack.

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We went down another level, there was a room with a small toilet and it is said that a portion of the room had been partitioned with an iron grill. We were not exactly sure what the purpose of this room was but we were told that this was where high ranking prisoners were held. From there we walked into a cylindrical room... this had an opening in the ceiling, which was said to have been another escape route for Prabakaran. All in all we had descended three levels underground. While the innocent Tamil people in the Wanni, lived without any bunker to protect them, or cool themselves with A/C, the LTTE leader Prabakaran and his family lived in luxury. Were they not a pure contradiction?

Prabakaran and his family lived in luxury. Were they not a pure contradiction?

We emerged outside, I was gasping for fresh air. Prabakaran's own shooting range, film hall and other ancillary buildings were situated in close proximity to the house. There were kitchens, generator rooms and much more. The sentry points were bullet proof, made of steel, there is a gap between the two sheets, which were filled with sand. Then the viewing area had been covered with bullet proof glass, which was not there anymore. There is a tar road, encircling the house, this is said to be where Prabakaran did his daily exercises. The compound is said to be massive, we had seen only a small part of it. The compound is well hidden and though we had used the new road to the house there is another through the jungle. We were surprised to see boards in Tamil, saying 'beware of spy planes'. It was dark now and we called it a day. We stopped for a warm cuppa tea at a brightly lit shop, we had a laugh about the size of the geckos in the Wanni and Colombo, the shop owners were amused. It was nice to see them smile. We are not different, you know!

Of course the 'LTTE Leader' did not have just one house, he had another. The house was somewhat smaller than the previous and the roof was camouflaged with coconut leaves

Next morning, we decided to explore the LTTE places in Kilinochchi. We stopped a couple of times to ask directions to the LTTE farm, and whoever we asked kept saying that we can visit Prabakaran's bunker and we were like no, we visited that place yesterday. However, since everyone was insisting we decided to explore and

were we in for a surprise! Of course the 'LTTE Leader' did not have just one house, he had another. The house was somewhat smaller than the previous and the roof was camouflaged with coconut leaves. This house had been built in 2004 under the supervision of the LTTE Intelligence Wing Leader Pottu Amman. The front door, consisted of beautiful carvings. We entered from the side door. There was a large living room and one large bedroom with an attached bathroom. The bedroom still had some of the family's furniture such as a bed, TV and clothes rack. The bathroom was large with an area to wash clothes. We came out and walked into the other room where we were able to go into the two storey bunker. The first floor consisted of Prabakaran's room, his furniture was still there including the apparatus he kept his insulin in. One of his uniforms were on display as well. Furthermore, there was a bed, fridge, cupboard as well as a wooden leopard that had been gifted to him during one of his birthdays. This bunker too was fully A/C with a supply of oxygen. Two generators of 37 KW were used to power the entire compound.

We descended into the next level which consisted of a smaller Operations Room. The door to this room was of solid 'burutha', as in the previous house. Except for this particular door, all doors were made of steel and the locks were in the inside. We descended further, and the last room was where weapons had been kept.

We came out, in the garden was a satellite disc as well as other communications apparatus. There is a massive well in the centre. It is said that the best water in the district is found here. Here too, is a small building where Prabakaran paid his respects to any fallen member. In another building in the same premises, LTTE uniforms, explosive devices such as the claymore bombs that were kept in buses, three wheeler bombs and other such items are displayed for people to see. At the entrance there is a large toy car, it deeply saddened us to see that this too had been improvised to create a bomb. A child is the innocence of life...

It is said that the Radha Brigade provided security to this compound and here too, the security arrangement consisted of rings.

We stepped out of the premises and while speaking with an Army soldier we were told that there was a Black Tiger base that we could visit. While giving directions, he said 'thana hoya ganna puluan nam balanna puluwan', (which means if you can find the place then you can have a look at the base) answering one of our many queries. Amused, we set out to find this elusive Black Tiger training camp. There were so many roads and each one looked the same as the other. At one time we thought we

were going in circles and we could not help but remember the young soldiers words.

We stopped at a small shop and I asked directions in the little Tamil that I know. The shopkeeper and his wife kept saying 'Nera Po, Nera Po'... Go straight... Go straight. And straight we went. It must be said that we were at first a bit hesitant to ask the people for directions, but their warmth and friendliness was moving... we are after all one people.

Back to the Black Tiger Base, it was very difficult to find but find it we did. The Training Camp was in an area called Punnaviravi. It was a massive compound. From the checkpoint we had to drive further into the jungle. Again, the sky was barely visible as the growth was heavy. I felt a bit apprehensive, after all this was the base where suicide cadres had trained. They killed themselves and innocent people, for what?

We passed a few buildings, which had been training facilities. And then we came to the two houses, which had been occupied by the head of the camp, Rathnam Master. We walked around, passing underground bunkers, a boxing ring where water had been filled under the platform as a cooling mechanism, a building where last respects were paid to their fallen comrades – here silhouettes of a male and female cadre had been painted on either side of the doorway – and a large hall with the LTTE insignia painted on its wall, this is where many lectures had been held.

The arrangement here as well was in the form of rings. We had to go in the vehicle to see the remaining places. We passed a gym, a training area, then the massive structure that is used for climbing... looking around one could not help but wonder at the destruction they could have caused if they had been allowed to continue. A little bit farther and we were out of the jungle and in the hot sun. We were at an air strip or what remains of it! The runway was not very long as the LTTE aircrafts were very simple structures. From the air strip when I looked towards the Black Tiger base I could only see jungle... pure jungle. The victory our valiant Armed Forces achieved was a hard earned one, the hardships they had to endure... well it is over now and we should be thankful. Never again should we allow this to happen to our country.

We were thoughtful as we left the Black Tiger base and our next destination was the much talked about LTTE 'Palathotam' (fruit farm). We stopped so many times to ask directions, we bumped along passing villages... life was returning... people were

walking on the roads, children were riding bicycles to schools, shops were open, music and laughter, after all that is what life is all about.

We soon arrived at the farm, which is now run by the Sri Lanka Army. This particular estate in Udayakattukulam was 200 Acres and was spread on both sides of the roads. What at first made us realise that we had arrived was the unending stretch of arecanut trees, I had never seen such a place before. There were neatly kept rows of mango, jackfruit, guava, grapes, coconut, arecanut, lime, orange, mandarin, pomegranate, banana, dragon fruit and vegetables. Some of the fruits had been newly introduced by the Army. Prior to venturing in we quenched our thirst with a freshly squeezed orange juice. As we walked inside we were astounded by the sheer capacity of this place. Apparently Soosai had been in-charge of this plantation and the produce had been sold for an income. We were told that all the trees and plants had been watered and fertilised through an expansive drip system, which had been provided by foreign organisations. This system had been powered through engines, which can be still seen today. The over ground pipe system had been removed with the clearance of mines but the underground irrigation system is still there. We did not walk the entire 200 Acres, but what we saw got us thinking.

We were at the LTTE prison. It had not rained in Killinochchi for many months, but as we neared the location the sky was overcast and gloomy, rain drops started to fall as if mother nature was in tears too

Our last stop was in Vishwamadu, this was a heart wrenching experience. We were at the LTTE prison. It had not rained in Killinochchi for many months, but as we neared the location the sky was overcast and gloomy, rain drops started to fall as if mother nature was in tears too. We were able to see two buildings where prisoners were held. The stories are too sad, the conditions in which they were held in these small cells are too hard to narrate...These prisons held not only Sinhala people but Tamils and Muslims too, they were held under the most inhuman conditions...We are all humans aren't we? Then, why?

There is one memory that stands out above the rest, the massive memorial in Puthukkudiyirippu. The detail of the statue is fine and nears perfection. It is of a soldier carrying the Sri Lankan flag and a gun with a white pigeon perched on it. This signifies that the Sri Lankan Armed Forces completed the task that was assigned to them, the national flag represents the pride of the country and white pigeon the peace to the nation. Our heroic Armed Forces brought peace to our country by sacrificing life and limb...

The people in Mullaitivu and Killinochchi are starting their lives a fresh...

For thirty years Sri Lanka suffered, never again should we let this happen to our country... never again should we let our people feel the sadness of war.

The people in Mullaitivu and Killinochchi are starting their lives a fresh... a life of peace and most importantly....freedom. As a nation we have emerged out of the shadows...

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