Kandula: The Warrior Elephant

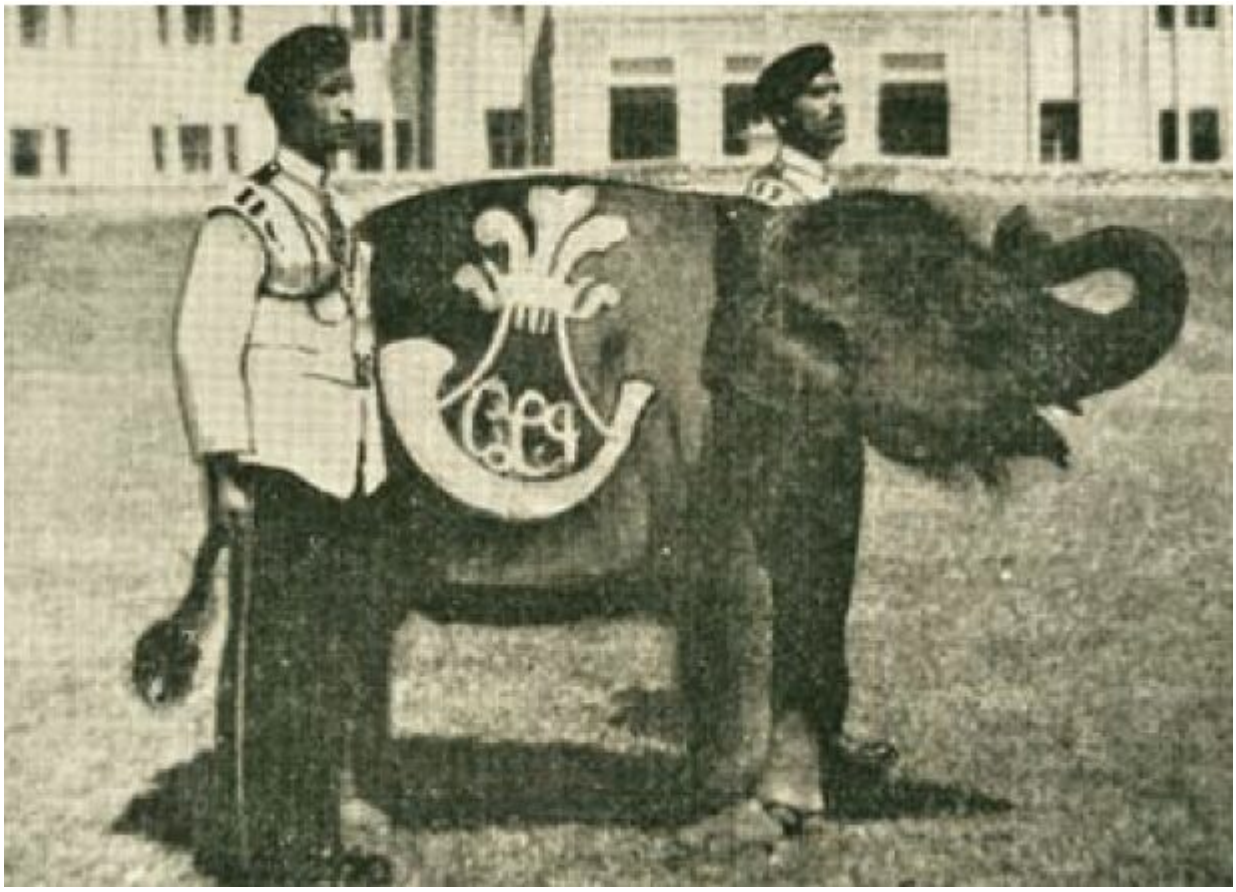
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“Foremost in strength, beauty, shape and the qualities of courage and swiftness and of mighty size of body was the elephant Kandula,” is written in Mahawamsa. Hence, the name Kandula is synonymous with great elephants of the times gone by, and what better name to be given to the mascot of the Sri Lanka Light Infantry other than Kandula; named after the greatest elephant in the history of Sri Lanka.

Words Thilini Kahandawaarachchi Photographs Prabhath Chathuranga

According to Mahawamsa, the ancient chronicle of history of this nation, the day on which King Kavantissa’s Queen gave birth to their son Gamini, an elephant of the six-tusked race left his young one near a waterhole. A fisherman who found this young elephant informed the king of it and the king sent elephant trainers and took the abandoned baby elephant under his care. The elephant was named after Kandula, the fisherman who found the baby elephant.



Above: Kandula I, the very first mascot of the Ceylon Light Infantry



Below: A farewell and a reception – the incoming Kandula and his predecessor

Kandula grew up alongside Prince Gamini and by the time the Prince finally became King as Dutugemunu, Kandula had grown up to be a majestic tusker who won the hearts of everyone in the royal family. Notably it was riding on Kandula's back that King Dutugemunu defeated Elara and unified the country. Since then, Kandula has always been the name given to valiant warrior elephants.

In present day Sri Lanka, we came across another Kandula, at the Sri Lanka Light Infantry(SLLI), which was formerly known as Ceylon Light Infantry in Panagoda, Homagama, where Kandula is their regimental mascot. The only animal to be part of the guard of honour performed in respect of visiting dignitaries and Heads of States, the first baby elephant named Kandula I was brought to the SLLI as its mascot in 1961. Since then there have been seven baby elephants to-date, who have served the SLLI as their mascot and been named Kandula I to Kandula VII.

Kandula I was captured in September 1960 during an elephant trapping expedition conducted at Rambepitiya by Major Aubrey Weinman, then Director of the Zoological Gardens. Kandula I served as the regimental mascot until July 27, 1967. Since then every few years a baby elephant is selected from the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage and trained as the mascot of the SLLI.



Kandula VII bowing down at the temple inside the Panagoda Camp

The trainers from the SLLI spend about two months in Pinnawala, getting acquainted with the baby elephant and then once he is brought to the Panagoda camp, he undergoes training and takes part in special ceremonies in the capacity of regimental mascot, dressed in a red and blue uniform. “You know how precious the casket in a temple is, with how much devotion, respect and veneration it is treated with, for us Kandula is like that. He is the gem of the camp,” says an officer of the Panagoda Camp.



Kandula at a ceremony

Kandula takes part in daily parades and special ceremonies and is paid a salary for his upkeep. Though Kandula is not officially conferred a rank, it is only those of the rank above Sergeant Majors who can lead a parade, and Kandula leads the parade of the SLLI. When he hears the command “aachara”, meaning ‘salute’, just like the soldiers who salute, Kandula would also put his trunk up in salutation.



Kandula VII in uniform

When there is a special ceremony or a parade, Kandula is taken to the place of ceremony in advance and familiarised with the setting, so that on the day of the actual ceremony he would remain calm.



Kandula VII taking part in a parade

To celebrate 50 years of the regimental mascot Kandula, the Sri Lanka Light Infantry is organising an exhibition to be held in February 2011 where photographs and videos showcasing memorable moments with the seven Kandulas will be displayed.

Once every few years, when the baby elephant becomes too big to be the mascot anymore, the elephant is sent back to the Zoological Department or the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage. The farewell ceremony for Kandula is always a solemn event at the Panagoda Camp. The send off is a grand ceremony, but the goodbye is never easy for the pachyderm or the officers who have taken care of the baby elephant as a gem for years. But similar to a retired officer of the Armed Forces, Kandula is also taken care of by the State, with a payment for his upkeep in the form of a pension. If you go to Pinnawala, where some Kandula elephants who have served the SLLI have come back home, when they hear the word “aachara”, they still put up their

trunk and salute. Clichéd as it may be, old habits die hard, they say.



Up close – Kandula VII



Aachara: Kandula VII saluting at the command