Locked In The Jungle Lost In Time The Oil Tank Farm Of Trincomalee

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The aerial view of the oil tanks scattered around the land

“Locked in the jungle and lost in time” is perhaps the easiest and surest way to describe one of Sri Lanka’s greatest assets. Disused for well over a half a century, the oil tank farm of Trincomalee still stands proudly enveloped in the dense jungles of Eastern Sri Lanka whilst a slow hum of development seems to have revived the region after decades of war.

Words and Photographs Shyam Ranasinghe

Built by the British between the two World Wars, the oil tanks are spread across an area of approximately one thousand acres. Solid steel plates riveted together form an impressive structure, which can hold 12,000 tons of fuel. Peeping through a

drain hole in the bottom I was awed by the construction inside. Even the floors of the tanks were laced with solid steel plates whilst the inspection ladders were still strong and firm. I quickly grabbed the opportunity and climbed atop one tank. The view was indeed breathtaking with the Trincomalee harbour in panoramic view. A peep through an inspection hatch above still gave out the stench of fuel, which slowly took me back to the years where the complex was a hive of activity. Although covered by thick shrubbery and dry zone jungle, the complex still holds impressive evidence to the level of engineering that prevailed during yesteryear.

Crouching and traversing through the dense jungle, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer size of this marvellous structure. Remnants of the pump assembly located at the outlet of each tank still stands solid and firm connected to the manifold. The notable fact of the supply manifolds is that each tank is fed through gravity that is, no special pumping was required from the ship and the incoming fuel could be sent directly to the tank, thanks to the individualised manifold arrangement. The mechanism of this now lies under layers of earth and remains lost in time. The inlet and drain feeds were filtered ensuring a clean supply of fuel. However, the manifold arrangement is such that it was most economical to store furnace oil which was the main fuel used by ships.

Although Covered By Thick Shrubbery And Dry Zone Jungle, The Complex Still Holds Impressive Evidence To The Level Of Engineering That Prevailed During Yesteryear.

The decision to construct the oil tank farm was taken in the early 1920s. Soon after the completion of World War I, the British, who were in control of the Island, decided to build up a sound logistic base in Ceylon. Trincomalee, being the primary naval nerve centre, owing to the fact that the harbour is the world’s second deepest natural harbour (the first being Sydney) and home to the British Eastern Fleet, was the ideal location. Construction work began in 1924 and completed in the late 1930s. Indeed, the dates engraved in some metal piping indicate dates as far back as 1937.

The complex was designed with all security features in mind. Each and every tank was built in a basin carved into the earth, where the bunds between act as a natural rampart. The construction is not welded and is riveted instead with multiple rows of rivets. Legend has it that labourers were brought in from British African colonies to complete the work. Altogether 102 tanks were built with tank number 100 being omitted. Probably out of superstition, the tank site was cleared but construction never took place.

The complex fell into disuse after the British left the Island and the tanks were slowly left at the mercy of nature. It is sad to note that some solid steel girders and piping have been cut away probably by unscrupulous vendors seeking the metal. Nevertheless, many tanks still possess the complete mechanism, which remain locked and frozen in time. The dried and splintered level indicators remain weather weary but the majestic look when it did serve its purpose is still evident upon close inspection.

The tank complex was one of the key targets of the Japanese air raids in 1942. Japanese aircraft under the command of Admiral Chuichi Nagumo screamed across the skies of Trincomalee on April 9, 1942. The British air defences sprang into action and the British fighters quickly took to the sky to meet their enemy. One Japanese aircraft, flown by Shigenori Watanabe, Tukyagoto and Sutomu Toshira crashed into tank number 91 which is by far the most famous tank in the complex. The ensuing fire was said to have lasted for seven days.

As I made my way to tank number 91, which lay in a corner of the complex, the haunting eeriness of the devastation can be felt well before. The burnt out tank still lay like a giant cake that has collapsed upon itself. The thick metal plates which stand firm and taut in the other tanks lay twisted and twirled akin to paper. The tar and burnt out oil sludge still litter the area and the solid silence which is occasionally broken by the creak of an insect evokes the horrors that would have enveloped the area on that fateful day. The structure of the centre truss of the roof is seen smashed out in the centre of the tank and it pictorially reveals the devastation caused by the Japanese aircraft.

True to being a war time establishment, the complex even had its own air defences. On the summit of one of the hillocks of the complex the remnants of an air defence gun point can be found. With a 360° panoramic view, this small emplacement provided vital support including fortifications for shelter in case of an attack.

Part of the complex that is closer to the shore has now been revived and is being used for commercial storage of fuel. However, the major share of the tanks still remain locked in the jungle and whether it will remain lost in time is perhaps a question that will have to be kept for the future.

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