

It was 5 October 1987. The Palali military base, in northern Sri Lanka, was bustling with activity that afternoon. Indian soldiers, their weapons at the ready, milled around a single-storey building. Medium machine guns (MMGs) primed with hundreds of 7.62mm bullets had been positioned in the vicinity and a chain of grenades encircled the building: removing one pin off a grenade would start a series of blasts, unleashing a tornado of sound and destructive fury. The big guns of the armoured protective carriers of the IPKF were menacingly pointing towards the building, which housed seventeen LTTE prisoners.

These were no ordinary prisoners. They included two of the LTTE's top leaders: its Batticaloa commander, Pulendran, and its Trincomalee commander, Kumarappa. Pulendran was leader of the LTTE squad that had shot dead 126 Sinhalese bus passengers, including many children, at Habarana and Kithulotowa in April 1987, in

one of the deadliest terror attacks in Sri Lanka. Kumarappa was the brother-in-law of the LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran. The men had been smuggling arms in their boat when they were arrested from Point Pedro in the Palk Straits by the Sri Lankan navy on 2 October and brought to Palali, where they were under IPKF custody, as the Indians, the neutral party, were umpiring between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.

At Palali the Indian army's 54 Artillery Brigade was administratively in charge of the prisoners. Commanded by Major General Harkirat Singh, 54 Airborne Division was then the de facto IPKF headquarters in Sri Lanka. Also present at the base were Sri Lankan soldiers and the 10 Para Commando battalion of the Indian army.

On 5 October the prisoners asked for some stationery, which was duly supplied by the soldiers of the 54 Artillery Brigade. Around noon came tiffin carriers with lunch for the prisoners. The Indian soldiers allowed in the food after cursory checks, as they had been doing the past three days. But that day they missed a crucial element in the lunch boxes. Buried in the food was something more potent than a Tamil curry: cyanide capsules.

At ten that morning, Major Sheonan Singh, leader of the para commandos team, had received orders from 54 Division to hand over the prisoners to the Sri Lankan army at 4 p.m. Sheonan's men had laid the MMGs and

the grenades as a protective measure, to allow the Indian soldiers to safely leave the building after the handover.

The handing over of the LTTE prisoners to the Sri Lankans had been a contentious issue. The anti-India faction of the Sri Lankan government had demanded that the LTTE men be brought to Colombo for trial. The LTTE said that their men had been granted amnesty and would be tortured if taken to Colombo. The LTTE was hoping that the IPKF would not bow down to Sri Lankan pressure. After all, the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka – for which the LTTE had taken up arms – had been supported by India.

Sheonan understood the political consequences of the orders he had received. He pleaded with the military operations directorate at Delhi not to hand over the LTTE prisoners to the Sri Lankan army – it would lead to a dangerous rupture between the LTTE and the IPKF, and alienate Tamils, both in Sri Lanka and in India – but to no avail. Kumarappa, who overheard his conversation, asked Sheonan, 'Why are you doing this? Our leaders have told us that if we are handed over to the Sri Lankan army we will have our last meal and write our last letter.'

At the time, Sheonan didn't grasp the import of what Kumarappa had said; his words would come back to haunt him later.

He looked at his watch. It was 4 p.m. He walked up to the Sri Lankan colonel and, as he handed over charge of the LTTE prisoners to him, said, 'All yours and I wish you the best.' Sheonan then informed the Colonel GS – the principal staff officer to General Harkirat – over the wireless radio that the LTTE prisoners were now in the custody of the Sri Lankan army.

Sheonan and his men drove back to their base 500 metres away. Within a few minutes, a staff officer from Division HQ, which was within walking distance, came running. He told Sheonan to return to the building and take back custody of the prisoners from the Sri Lankans. An angry Sheonan retorted that he needed specific orders to do so. Minutes later the Colonel GS, who had taught Sheonan at Staff College in Wellington a couple of years earlier, came personally to ask him to take the prisoners back from the Sri Lankans.

Sheonan's response was: 'Am I to open fire if Sri Lankans don't hand the prisoners back? What am I to do if Sri Lankans open fire on the LTTE prisoners? What if both sides fire on each other?' He wanted explicit orders to cover all these contingencies. The Colonel GS tried to get through to the military operations directorate at Delhi for answers, but it was already too late. While he was on the phone, Sheonan got a wireless message from the Sri Lankans: Pulendran, Kumarappa and the other

prisoners had swallowed cyanide pills. And thirteen of them were dead.

The suicide of the prisoners turned the LTTE bitterly and violently against India and the IPKF. The vacillation by New Delhi on 5 October 1987 was to cast a long, dark and bloody shadow, leading to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE in May 1991. But the immediate consequence was a military debacle.



The LTTE were especially stung by what they saw as India's betrayal, because, for years, the Indian government had supported the Tamil demand for equal political rights in Sri Lanka. The LTTE itself had been bestowed with considerable largesse by New Delhi, which saw Prabhakaran and his band – funded, trained, supplied and guided by Indian intelligence agencies – as 'our boys'. The LTTE's record of murder and mayhem was no doubt chilling, but the organization, and the cause it represented, had substantial popular support in Tamil Nadu.

As recently as June 1987, the travails of Sri Lankan Tamils had weighed heavily on India's Sri Lanka policy. That month, Delhi announced it was sending a convoy of unarmed ships to northern Sri Lanka to provide humanitarian assistance to Tamils trapped in Jaffna,

under siege by the Sri Lankan army. These ships were intercepted by the Sri Lankan navy and forced to return to India. Following the failure of the naval mission, Rajiv Gandhi decided to airdrop relief supplies for Tamils in Jaffna. This demonstrated India's concern for the civilian Tamil population and signalled to the Sri Lankan government that India could, if necessary, exercise the option of active Indian military intervention in support of Sri Lankan Tamils.

Having demonstrated his political will, Rajiv Gandhi signed the India-Sri Lanka accord with the Sri Lankan President, J. Jayewardene, on 29 July 1987, aimed at bringing peace to the island nation while ensuring Tamil rights. Under the terms of the agreement, Colombo agreed to a devolution of power to the provinces, the Sri Lankan troops were to be withdrawn to their barracks in the north and the Tamil rebels were to disarm. The LTTE was not a signatory to the accord and played a delicate balancing game for the first couple of months. It claimed to support the accord – it performed a symbolic surrender ceremony with some old weapons in early August – but insisted that the Sri Lankan government had not kept its part of the deal.

Under the mandate of the accord, an Indian military contingent called the Indian Peace Keeping Force was sent to Sri Lanka, primarily for policing duties. Major

General Harkirat Singh, who was commanding the Secunderabad-based 54 Airborne Division – which consisted of around 10,000 men – became the first commander of the IPKF, based at Palali. His troops left Secunderabad for Sri Lanka within six hours of the signing of the accord.

No detailed military planning was done while dispatching the troops from Secunderabad, as no one imagined that Indian soldiers would be fighting the LTTE, or that the LTTE would prove to be such tough fighters. J.N. Dixit, then Indian high commissioner at Colombo (he became the national security adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2004), later recalled in his memoirs, 'Harkirat Singh told me that he envisaged IPKF's responsibility as a limited one, namely, the maintenance of law and order in Jaffna and Trincomalee as the Sri Lankan army and paramilitary forces had been withdrawn from those areas.'

When Dixit mentioned that the IPKF could have the additional responsibility of ensuring that the accord was implemented, Harkirat's response was: 'That is all very well, Sir, but I hope we do not get involved in a shooting match because of this Agreement.'

But this was precisely what came to pass. While trying to ensure that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE adhered to the India-Sri Lanka accord, the IPKF soon

found itself under pressure from both sides. Its delicate and difficult balancing act collapsed disastrously after the mass suicide of the LTTE prisoners, with the LTTE announcing its withdrawal from the India-Sri Lanka accord. Prabhakaran and his men were now openly on a confrontational path with the IPKF. They started attacking Indian troops at various places in northern Sri Lanka. India had to change tack too, with a swiftness that was almost surreal given its past pro-Tamil approach. The day after the mass suicide, General K. Sundarji, the Indian army chief, launched Operation Pawan, to wrest control of Jaffna from the LTTE.

Over the next thirty months, many military units took part in Operation Pawan. The units that were inducted the earliest bore the biggest brunt. Sheonan's unit, 10 Para Commandos, was one such.



In 1987 the Indian army had only three para commando battalions – 1, 9 and 10 – and they comprised volunteers who were reputed to be the absolute best of the best in soldiering. Physically extremely fit, mentally robust and trained to operate on their own in small teams, these men in their distinctive maroon berets worn at a jaunty angle matched up with the best in the world and took immense

professional pride in wearing the Balidan (Sacrifice) badge on their shirt.

Sheonan Singh, who retired as a major general, is a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a rather unusual background for a para commando. He graduated as an engineer from Roorkee University and joined the army as a sapper officer. Even though he was a topper in early military courses, his blunt, outspoken manner didn't endear him to many of his superiors in the engineer unit. He volunteered for the famously rigorous commando course, and was sent to Belgaum for it.

The five-week course entails jumping from high walls, walking on narrow platforms and beams, slithering down ropes from helicopters, endurance runs of up to 40 kilometres carrying an 18.5-kilo battle load and rifle, battle obstacle courses, rock climbing, rappelling, combat firing and confidence jumps. Commandos are also taught survival techniques – how to live off the land – which includes eating snakes. Once a commando has killed and eaten a snake, the logic goes, he will not shy away from anything.

Sheonan topped the course at Belgaum and was subsequently posted as an instructor there. Two years later he volunteered to join 10 Para Commandos, which was stationed at Jodhpur.

In July 1987, he had just arrived at Jodhpur. He was

still on leave, settling his family in before formally joining duty, when he got orders late one night: he was to bring 10 Para Commandos to the airfield from where they would be flown to an unknown location. His commanding officer, Lt Col Dalbir Singh, had earlier been summoned to army headquarters at Delhi, and he too was to join the unit at the airfield.

Collecting 254 out of the 560 people in the unit – the rest were on summer leave – Sheonan boarded the aircraft. Dalbir Singh soon joined them, and only when the plane was airborne was the aircrew told that their destination was Sular in Tamil Nadu. But their final destination was, in fact, Sri Lanka.

Soon after the para commandos landed at Sular, a team of twenty men under Dalbir Singh left for Colombo to secure the Indian high commission there. Their main job was to move the Sri Lankan president, in case of a coup, to the safe premises of the Indian high commission. A second team of 110 para commandos went to Palali in northern Sri Lanka. In the event of a crisis, the second team would be flown to Colombo in helicopters provided by the IAF to support the first team, at the high commission. Sheonan was part of the third and last group of 110 para commandos, who were also moved to Palali: their task would be to capture Colombo airport in the event of a coup or other crisis.

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Indian army HQ in Delhi had planned for various contingencies in Sri Lanka, mostly in anticipation of an attempt to overthrow the Sri Lankan President. Unfortunately, what they never planned for was the LTTE turning on its Indian masters.



Both the para commando teams based in Palali had their 'door loads' packed for a few days of fighting, ready to move the moment they got the go-ahead. A door load is a packet of arms, ammunition and other equipment needed during a battle, fitted with a beacon on top which starts blinking the moment the packet hits the ground. This 'door load' is thrown from the aircraft or helicopter before the para commandos move out.

Sheonan and his team settled into Palali, a hamlet on the outskirts of Jaffna. Palali was an important military airport, built by the British during the Second World War, and the main lifeline for the Jaffna peninsula. A high-security zone spread over 25 square kilometres around the airfield was the headquarters of the IPKF and the nerve centre of all Indian military operations in the country.

Every detail of Sheonan's time in Jaffna is still sharply etched in his mind, even though the events he was recalling had taken place nearly thirty years earlier. Most

of the other military men involved in what had turned out to be an appalling military fiasco did not want to speak about it. As one former para commando said, 'I have forgotten and moved on. I have no wish to refresh my memory of those days.'

Para commandos, by the very nature of their training and role, are always on the alert for sudden emergencies. But, says Sheonan, a man of strong opinions which he doesn't hesitate to express, the rest of the army was not mentally prepared for fighting. 'General Harkirat Singh saw the IPKF as an extension of the peace station at Secunderabad. If left to him, he would have organized family welfare meets there.' Harkirat Singh turned out to be both unprepared for the task of confronting the LTTE and unwilling to adapt quickly to the fast-changing situation.

Shortly after Operation Pawan was launched, General Sundarji announced in Colombo that the Indian army would finish the LTTE in a week. On 6 October, the day Operation Pawan was launched, the LTTE's printing presses at Jaffna were destroyed by the Maratha battalion, and clashes between the LTTE and IPKF started at various places. But this information was not shared with all the IPKF troops. Sheonan and his men at Palali were certainly not aware of it.

On 10 October, a party of para commandos left

Palali at around 5 p.m. – as part of its routine logistical duties – to collect food supplies from the ration point at Kankasanturai, three kilometres to the west. It was a ten-minute journey by road. When his men didn't return till 6.30 p.m., Sheonan walked up to the Division HQ and told them, 'Our Jonga and five men are missing and we want to go and check their whereabouts.'

'Thank God someone wants to go and check,' the Colonel GS replied. That is when Sheonan came to know that such mishaps had happened with other IPKF units as well – more than thirty soldiers went missing that day, but not many units were willing to go looking for their men. Sheonan led a patrol on foot but was unable to find either the men or their vehicle. The Jonga was recovered from inside a house two months later; the bodies of the five men were never found.

They were the first casualties suffered by 10 Para Commandos since the 1971 war.



With the LTTE declaring war on the IPKF, Harkirat Singh was now short of troops. He needed more forces. Army headquarters had already earmarked 72 Infantry Brigade at Gwalior – with three infantry battalions of around 800 men each, under Brigadier B.D. Mishra – as

a quick reaction force for a contingency task in Sri Lanka. Mishra's brigade headquarters, along with two of his three battalions – 4/5 Gorkha Rifles (4/5 GR) and 13 Sikh Light Infantry (13 Sikh LI) – arrived in Palali by air at 10 a.m. on 11 October.

Soon after the Sikh LI landed, Sheonan and the Commanding Officer of 13 Sikh LI, Lt Col R.S. Sethi, were summoned for a briefing at the Division HQ. Sethi was totally unprepared for the orders he received that day. His battalion was to land at Jaffna University ground in a heliborne operation that night. The para commandos under Sheonan were to precede Sethi's men and secure the landing zone for them.

Official records show that Sethi made repeated requests for the operation to be postponed by at least twenty-four hours: due to some logistical problems only 250 of his 800 men had arrived in Palali and he had no information about the area in which he was to operate. Harkirat Singh also pleaded for a postponement but was told that 'it was not desirable'. In the event, Sethi and his men followed Tennyson's oft-quoted words: 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die'.

During the briefing, Sheonan was ordered to 'take off at 1 a.m. on the 12th, go and secure a landing zone in Jaffna University grounds. 13 Sikh LI will follow and they will take over the place from you. You will then move

on foot to Jaffna town, go to the bus stand (which is 6–7 km away), and embark on vehicles placed there. You will have hot meals at Palali in the morning.'

Every commando operation has an alternate task but the Colonel GS had not mentioned any. When Sheonan asked for one, he gave the para commandos the alternate task of raiding and destroying the LTTE headquarters in the university complex. This alternate task – expanded to include the capture of the top LTTE leadership – was later portrayed as the main task for which the heliborne operation was launched by the IPKF. The official version claims that 13 Sikh LI was to capture the LTTE's military HQ at Jaffna University, while the para commandos were to capture the LTTE's political HQ located there by dawn on 12 October 1987. Mishra with 4/5 Gurkha Rifles would link up with the Sikh LI battalion by road. If all went according to plan, Jaffna would be in IPKF hands by the end of the operation.

The Division HQ had not selected an alternative landing zone for the heliborne operation if for some reason the forces were unable to land at the original landing zone. When Sheonan pointed this out, the Colonel GS hastily – and randomly – selected on the map the only open patch of ground in the vicinity, around two kilometres north of the university ground.

Sethi was given a civil map of 1938 vintage and he

and his 100-odd Sikh LI troops had to depend on that to get their bearings of the area they were going to that night. Sheonan and his para commandos were not even given that map. But Sheonan had been in Palali for over two months and had driven around and been to the Jaffna University campus out of curiosity, so he was somewhat familiar with the area. Sheonan had also managed to get coloured photocopies of gridded military maps of Jaffna from the Sri Lankan army's Northern Command, whose officers he had befriended.

'There was no intelligence available during our briefing, either about the place or the strength and disposition of the enemy,' Sheonan recounts.

This is not surprising, considering the IPKF was operating under several handicaps. For one, it had never been in conflict with the LTTE until then – in fact, top IPKF generals had landed at Jaffna University ground to meet LTTE chief Prabhakaran just four days earlier in a last-ditch effort at a patch-up.

The IPKF had around 6000 military personnel deployed in the Jaffna peninsula then, though the number would have been closer to 10,000 if all the units were at full strength. Since troops were flown in to Sri Lanka at very short notice, some 40 per cent of the men were on leave, away on training courses or busy with other duties.

The IPKF also vastly underestimated the strength and

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fighting capability of the LTTE – it assumed the strength of its cadre to be between 1500 and 2500, and did not rate the Tamil fighters very highly. The IPKF leadership believed the LTTE would simply disintegrate as the Indian infantry advanced on Jaffna, and even told senior Sri Lankan army officials that the operation to capture Jaffna would be concluded in three days.

As Harkirat Singh's successor at Palali, Lt Gen. S.C. Sardeshpande, noted in his memoirs, *Assignment Jaffna*, Sundarji's order to capture Jaffna 'came as a shock to the IPKF after four months of lavish honeymoon with the LTTE; the IPKF had a lot of apprehensions, reservations, doubts' and 'nobody had thought that LTTE would hit IPKF in the face with benumbing violence unleashed by deadly IEDs and vicious small arms fire in built-up areas and across lagoons'.

Sheonan was witness to a conversation between Sundarji and Harkirat Singh at Palali airport on 8 October. When the army chief asked Singh for the plan of operations, Harkirat Singh said he would induct a heliborne battalion at Jaffna, which would then join up with the Maratha battalion at Jaffna Fort, and the IPKF would then be in full control of the city.

'See you in Jaffna on the 12th,' said Sundarji breezily, as he shook hands with Harkirat Singh and boarded his flight.

As General Gerry H. de Silva of the Sri Lankan army, then Security Forces Commander of Jaffna, observes in his memoirs, *A Most Noble Profession*, Harkirat Singh and his senior staff were overconfident and dismissive of the LTTE. The LTTE in fact were well armed, with AK-47s, G3 rifles and machine guns, and they had an almost unending supply of well-trained and battle-hardened fighters. The Indian army, in contrast, had not fought a war since 1971.



The plan for the Jaffna landings was simple. The IAF had four Mi-8 helicopters based at Palali and all four were allocated for the operation. Each of these would do five sorties, ferrying twenty soldiers to the university ground on each sortie. With a flying time of only about four minutes from Palali airfield to Jaffna University, the multiple sorties were not seen as a problem.

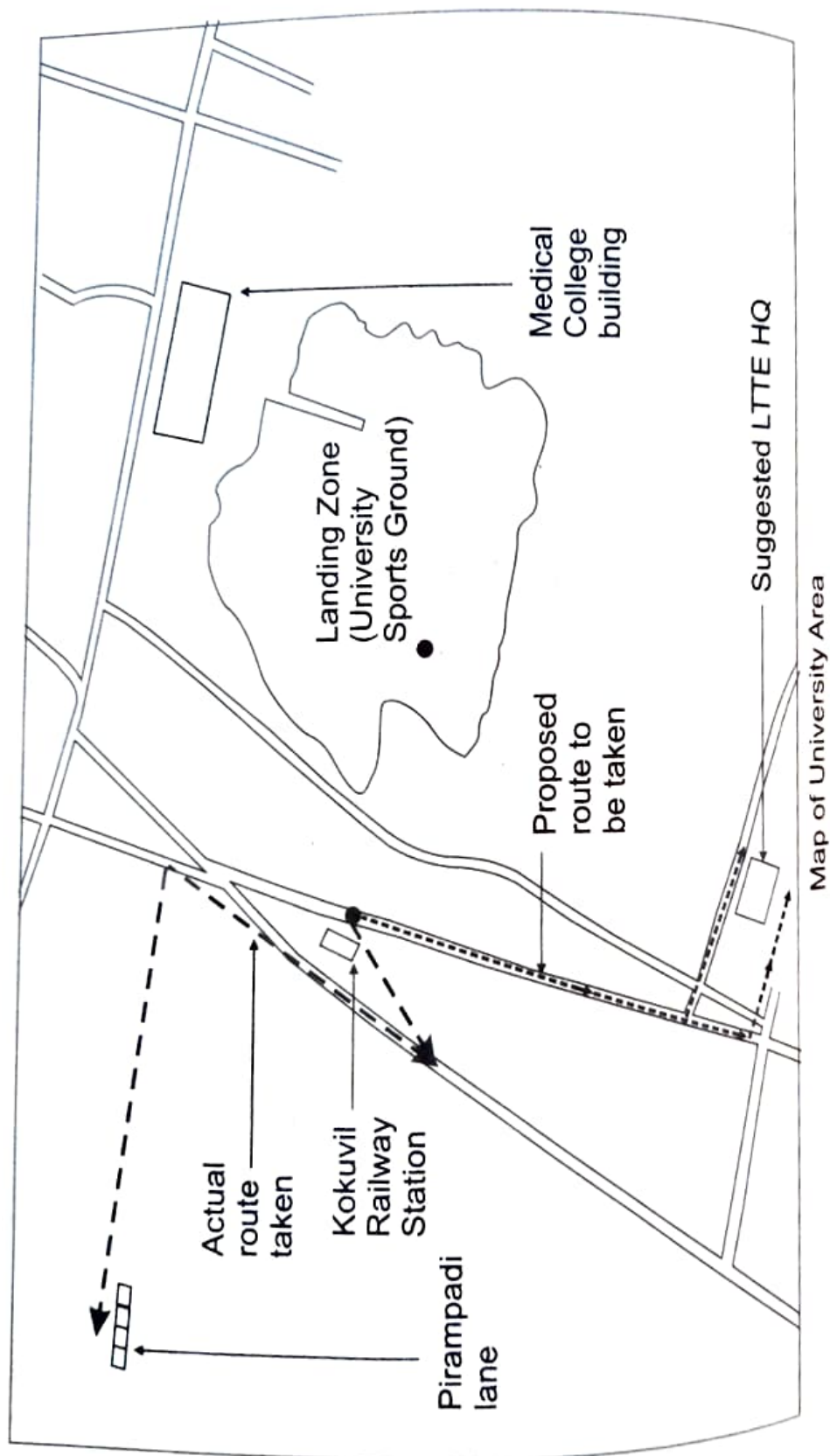
Eighty para commandos – twenty in each of the four helicopters – would be dropped in the first of five waves. They would be followed by 40 para commandos and 40 infantry troops from the Sikh LI in the second wave. In the subsequent three waves only the Sikh LI troops, including Sethi, would be dropped.

Interestingly, in August and September these same

Mi-8 IAF helicopters had ferried the LTTE leaders around as they met their cadres and other personnel. In retrospect, it is clear that the LTTE had used this 'honeymoon period' to gather every bit of information on the IPKF, while the IPKF considered the LTTE a friend.

During an aerial reconnaissance on the afternoon of 11 October, the IPKF realized that the landing ground at Jaffna University could accommodate only two Mi-8s at a time. So, instead of keeping two helicopters hovering in the air while the first two unloaded the troops, the IAF decided that the second pair of helicopters would take off from Palali only after the first two had disembarked the men and started their return leg to Palali.

The Jaffna University area was like many other university campuses in South Asia, with a grid of straight, intersecting roads setting off administrative, academic and residential buildings. The oval-shaped sports ground, which had unusually little grass cover for the monsoon season, had a big, shady tree in the centre. It was bounded by a muddy running track, 400 metres long. On its northern edge was a three-storey medical college building; an administrative building hugged its southern edge. The Kokuvil railway station, on the railway line running from Jaffna to Kankasanturai (north to south), lay 150 metres to the west of the ground. Some trees and small huts dotted the eastern side of the ground.



Given the favourable meteorological forecast, the complete helicopter movement – ten waves of two helicopters each – was estimated to take about 90 minutes. The first two helicopters would take off at 0100 hours on 12 October. Certain that the possibility of ground fire was remote, the IPKF decided not to fit rocket pods to the Mi-8s to save weight.

The IPKF also asked the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) to deploy one helicopter gunship in support of its mission. The SLAF was tasked to carry out a diversionary attack near the university during the landing operation, to overwhelm and distract the LTTE cadre.

So far, so good. There was no reason for the IPKF to be alarmed about anything.



After coming back from the reconnaissance helicopter flight on 11 October, Sheonan took stock of the situation. He decided to take with him the team of para commandos that had originally been assigned to secure Colombo airport in case of a political crisis. A total of 103 para commandos, including three officers, Sheonan, Major Rajiv Nair and Captain Ranbir Bhadauria, and the unit doctor, Captain Ajit Joseph Veniyoor, together with his nursing assistant, would land at the university

ground with him. Veniyoor was physically the fittest of the para commandos, and very calm under pressure. As someone who could read and understand Tamil, he also acted as an intelligence officer for his comrades. Now a practising oncologist at Muscat, he says he has blotted out all memories of those fateful hours in Jaffna. On the other hand, Bhadauria, now living in retirement at Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh, where his wife works as an ophthalmologist, continues to be haunted by Jaffna and went back there in 2016 to try to exorcize painful memories.

While Sheonan gathered his team, Sethi, the Sikh LI CO, decided to nominate Major Birendra Singh as the leader of the Sikh LI team until Sethi landed. Birendra Singh was a relative of former union minister Natwar Singh, rated highly by his battalion and much loved by his men. Birendra Singh was to take over the landing zone from the para commandos, and Sethi and the rest of his unit would follow in the subsequent waves.

Then a tricky question arose. Sheonan asked Sethi who the commander of the joint team would be until Sethi reached – Birendra Singh or Sheonan? Sethi refused to put his men under Sheonan's command. Harkirat Singh dismissed it as a minor issue, but Sheonan felt it was important that this be settled as any decision taken by the commander – whether to abort the mission or to

withdraw from the site – would have to be obeyed by the other person as a military order. Moreover, if Sheonan was the overall commander, he would wait till Sethi landed at the university to hand over the place to him. But the question was left unresolved.

Sheonan suggested to Sethi that he send more men with rifles in the initial sorties. Heavier stores like ammunition for bigger weapons could follow in the subsequent sorties. Sethi, who had just landed at Palali, said dismissively, 'Arrey, ye lungi wale kya kar lenge?' [Come on, what can these lungi-clad LTTE chaps do?]

At the para commando base, Rajiv Nair and Sheonan decided to take with them to Jaffna the two existing door loads that had been put together in preparation for a quick takeover of Colombo airport. The door loads had ammunition and stores to last for four days of intense fighting.

Briefing his men, Sheonan said, 'We may be landing in a fighting situation. Be prepared to land and fire. Each man should know the direction plan so that you don't end up shooting each other. Once you land, go as far as you can towards the edge of the field.'

Sethi and Birendra Singh attended Sheonan's briefing but did not take his words seriously. They thought that he was just trying to keep his team charged up and on high alert.

Sheonan then asked Major Anurag Nauriyal, the leader of the para commandos team assigned the heliborne task at the Indian high commission, to move to the Palali helipad with a high frequency (HF) wireless radio set. An HF radio set can communicate over unlimited distance, even across continents.

'Nauriyal at Palali helipad with an HF radio set was the only communication that we had with Palali. Division HQ had planned no communication, either then or later,' Sheonan says.

Sheonan, Bhadauria, Veniyoor and his nursing assistant would be in the first helicopter while Nair would be in the second one. Fifty para commandos were to go in the first wave of two Mi-8s to light up the landing zone for the following helicopters to land.

Everyone was excited. 'Finally, we were doing an operational task,' says Sheonan. Bhadauria recalls, 'We were a bunch of enthusiastic boys ready to become men under fire.'



The para commandos raised the battle cry 'Durge Bhawani ki Jai' as the two Mi-8s, piloted by Wing Commander Sapre and Squadron Leader Vinay Raj, took off on schedule at 1 a.m. on 12 October, carrying

the first fifty men. Due to low drifting clouds and poor visibility, they could not adhere to the original briefing to fly at 300 metres altitude; instead, they flew at a lower altitude of around 200 metres.

The two helicopters observed a complete blackout – all lights were switched off, including the ‘blade tracking’ lights in the wing tips, which enable the pilots to manoeuvre in confined airspaces. The only visual cue for Vinay Raj to maintain the correct distance from Sapre’s helicopter was the single formation light on top of the tail boom of the leading Mi-8. These formation lights were also switched off as the choppers entered the last few metres of their descent. In spite of the poor visibility, the two pilots managed to locate the landing ground. Sapre hovered 10 metres over the landing zone while the para commandos slithered down a rope to the ground. As he was alighting, Bhadauria’s legs got entangled in the rope and he experienced some hair-raising moments as the helicopter took off with him dangling below it, desperately clutching the rope. Fortunately, the upward thrust of the helicopter untangled the rope in the nick of time and he jumped to the ground. It was the first of many lucky breaks for him over the next thirty-seven hours.

As they landed, Sheonan and his men immediately threw out the door loads. His men started running towards the edges of the ground to take their positions.