

Sapre came out and gave a thumbs-up sign to Sheonan. The Mi-8s took off, and Sheonan realized that they were under fire from the LTTE. The sound of fire from the LTTE's Chinese-made AK-47s and German G3 rifles had been drowned by the noise of the helicopters. Sheonan looked at his watch. It was 1.20 a.m.

As the two Mi-8s took off using full power, they too came under fire from the LTTE though neither was hit. Intelligence reports later confirmed that the LTTE were broadly aware of the IPKF's plans – they had intercepted the IPKF's VHF radio transmissions – but not fully prepared for the first landing. Sapre radioed Palali to send in the second pair of Mi-8s. By then, Sheonan had spoken to Nauriyal at the Palali helipad on radio and told him that they were under fire. He also instructed Nauriyal not to pass on this information to the IAF pilots as they may hesitate to fly in more troops.

Immediately after landing, Sheonan was supposed to light up the landing zone with markers to allow the following helicopters to land. The T-shaped marking is done by lighting a set of 'goose lamps', which have a wick that burns for three to four hours. As soon as the para commandos lit the first goose lamp, the team came under heavy fire. Sheonan decided against lighting the lamps and informed Palali of the change of plans. As in many battles, the first casualty was the battle plan.

In a few minutes, the second set of helicopters with the rest of the para commandos was to arrive. Sheonan recalls that he and his men 'kept waiting and waiting but no choppers came'.

The second set of Mi-8s was piloted by Prakash and Duraiswami. When they approached Jaffna University, they noticed that the entire area was enveloped in the flashes of small arms fire and grenade blasts. Flashes of tracer bullets from the SLAF attack helicopter in the distance painted an even scarier picture in the darkness of night. The landing ground had also not been lit up. Prakash and Duraiswami failed to locate the landing ground and decided to abort the mission. They flew back to Palali with fifty-three para commandos still on board.

The official enquiry on the incident indicted Sheonan for not lighting up the landing zone as per plan. It remains controversial to date, with opinions divided over Sheonan's decision. There are those who believe that the second set of sorties would not have been aborted had the para commandos lit up the landing zone.

Sheonan had his reasons: 'I was the man on ground and took the call. If the landing zone had been lit up, the LTTE fighters would have brought more concentrated fire on fifty of us. Also, the next set of helicopters landing there would have been targeted with heavier and more effective concentrated fire.'

Meanwhile, both Sapre and Vinay Raj had landed back at Palali. Birendra Singh and twenty-nine soldiers of the Sikh LI boarded the Mi-8s and Sapre and Vinay Raj took off for Jaffna University again. By then, the LTTE had figured out that the helicopters were coming from the north. They waited with AK-47 assault rifles and machine guns on the top of the medical college building on the northern edge of the landing ground, covering the approach of the helicopters.

As Vinay Raj prepared for the second landing, he heard a sudden increase in the intensity of gunfire. He realized that it was not from ground-level fighting, but from atop the northern building, and aimed directly at him. His crew felt the helicopter taking hits, with distinctive thumps as 7.62mm rounds pierced the Mi-8's outer skin.

The Mi-8s landed, and the infantrymen disembarked from the rear and took lying positions on the ground as per standard training drill. Some of them moved behind bushes and started digging into the undulating ground for better cover from enemy fire. Unlike the para commandos, they did not attempt to move to the edges of the ground. They were already under fire, and a bullet pierced through the ANPRC-25 wireless radio set carried by Birendra Singh's radio operator. Birendra Singh was now without communication with his CO, Sethi.

Operation Pawan

Expecting the rest of his para commandos in the second lot of helicopters, Sheonan was surprised to see the infantrymen disembarking from them. He asked Sapre, 'Where are my guys?'

'I am under heavy fire, but don't worry, I will get your chaps,' Sapre assured him.

As Sheonan gave a thumbs-up sign to Sapre to take off, Sapre pointed to the heavy wooden crates lying inside the chopper. The Sikh LI troops had already dispersed, and Sheonan, his doctor, nursing assistant and the radio operator had no choice but to unload the crates themselves. Birendra Singh had come with 1.5 tonnes of ammunition for the mortars, which meant that only thirty men could fit in the two choppers. This ammunition would be needed only when the mortars came in the last sortie.

'I was irritated as hell. Firstly, at four of us unloading the whole stuff, but more so because I had specifically advised Lt Col Sethi to send more armed men in the first flight and he sent stores instead of soldiers,' Sheonan recounts.

The two helicopters took off again amid the thumps and thuds made by the gunfire hitting them. Compared to the earlier take-off, the higher intensity of gunfire could be distinctly felt by Sapre and Vinay Raj.

By then, the fifty para commandos had opened the two door loads and distributed all the ammunition among themselves. They were prepared for a long haul.



When Sapre and Vinay Raj landed back at Palali, they found out that Duraiswami and Prakash had returned without dropping their load of para commandos. Sapre had given his word to Sheonan, and he and Vinay Raj decided to do one more trip to drop the fifty-three para commandos.

On approaching the Jaffna University ground for the third time, both helicopters came under intense fire from the LTTE gun positions. The LTTE had now massed even greater firepower at the medical college building. As the two Mi-8s neared the ground, machine gun firing was coming thick and fast and the crew could feel the helicopters getting hit continuously. One burst from a G3 rifle went into the battery compartment just behind the cockpit section, while another bullet shattered the cockpit side windscreen of Vinay Raj's helicopter. Luckily the bullet missed the pilots and the crew. Another bullet entered the cockpit from the floor, passing exactly between the two pilots. The crew later counted seventeen bullet holes in the helicopter. The hydraulics system of

Sapre's Mi-8 was shattered by LTTE fire. The two pilots were, however, able to get the fifty-three para commandos to the Jaffna University ground.

As they were taking off, Sapre told Sheonan, 'I am afraid no more helicopters can come now.'

It was only Sapre's skill that ensured that his damaged helicopter got back to Palali. Neither of the Mi-8s could fly further missions. Sapre realized that the fury of the LTTE ground firing during the third run had been of higher intensity than the earlier ones. The next mission, if flown, would result in even greater damage than this one. The IAF decided to stop further sorties.

Sheonan learnt this from Nauriyal around thirty minutes after Sapre and Vinay Raj had taken off from the Jaffna University ground amid heavy firing. Only then, at 2.45 a.m., Sheonan claims, did the Division HQ – located barely 300 metres away from the helipad at Palali – realize that the soldiers were under heavy firing and that two helicopters were no longer fit to fly.

Sethi had marched up to the Division HQ, and was trying to justify why he had sent fewer men and more stores. When Harkirat Singh asked Singh about the weapons Birendra Singh's team was carrying, Sethi started with the most potent weapon his men were carrying, the medium machine gun. Weighing eleven kilos, an MMG is a belt-fed automatic weapon,

supported on a tripod mounting, which fires a full-power 7.62mm rifle cartridge round. It fires 600–1000 bullets per minute.

'If there is an MMG, the lungiwalas dare not come near. These commandos keep on making unnecessary noise,' Harkirat Singh said. Meanwhile, Nauriyal told Sheonan to hold the LTTE at bay for some time, as the rest of the troops would come by foot. Even if they started immediately, it would take them at least three hours to cover the distance of 17 kilometres.

'If they were coming by foot now, why could we all not have come the same way? I had proposed that we all start at 9 p.m. and move cross-country, instead of using helicopters and telegraphing our intentions to LTTE. But that was shot down by the Division HQ,' Sheonan says now. The rationale for most decisions taken that day by the IPKF was understood, if at all, only by those who took them.



At the Jaffna University ground, firing from the LTTE had become intense. Para Commando Lok Ram, who came in the last Mi-8, later recounted to the *India Today* magazine, 'We thought everything was fine but as we were coming out of the helicopter we came under heavy

fire from all sides. It was an impossible situation. We were fighting an enemy we could not even see.'

As is evident from a radio intercept the Sri Lankan army provided the IPKF later, the LTTE too had little hope of surviving the night: 'In a broadcast by Prabhakaran over the LTTE communication network on early night 11/12th October, it was stated that the LTTE command at the camp centre were unlikely to survive and their death appeared imminent. As such the LTTE fighters in this camp would die fighting to the last and may not come on the air again. Therefore, those who survive the offensive will move to other areas, goodbye to you, and the regional commanders should take charge of the operations.'

All in all, the Indian soldiers were lucky. The LTTE was not aware that there would be no more helicopter sorties that night. The bulk of their fighters remained at the top of the medical college building in anticipation of the next helicopter, hoping to bring it down. This meant that the LTTE were firing at the soldiers from a height, and unless someone 'had his name written on a bullet', the chances of getting hit were far fewer than if the LTTE had been firing from ground level.

Once Sheonan knew that no more soldiers were coming by helicopter, he asked the Division HQ (by then a radio connection had been established between HQ and

Sheonan) to spell out the orders for him. 'Leave Major Birendra there at the university ground with his men and proceed to destroy the LTTE headquarters. Then move to the bus station to come back to Palali,' he was told.

'I will take Major Birendra with me. Otherwise, come daylight, he will be killed here,' Sheonan suggested.

His suggestion was overruled. Even so, Sheonan asked Birendra Singh if, in spite of the order, he would like to come with the para commandos.

'No, I will wait for my battalion here. My CO will come. Else it will look as if I deserted them,' Birendra Singh replied.

Sheonan could not order the major as the Sikh LI troops were not placed under his command. He could only make suggestions, which Birendra Singh was free to accept or reject. Sheonan now says that had he been in charge, he 'would have never asked the Division HQ about the orders for Major Birendra and his men. I would have just taken them along with me.'

However, Sheonan was now following the orders to raid the LTTE headquarters, which had been the alternate task assigned to the para commandos. The Sikh LI troops were going to be on their own. As Birendra Singh's radio set had been shot through, Sheonan gave him a wireless radio set from one of the para commandos, who are authorized many more radio sets than an infantry

battalion, so that he could stay in touch. That was the last Sheonan saw of Birendra Singh.

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The LTTE headquarters was supposed to be a building on the southern side of the campus, on Tabbil Pedi Lane, a couple of roads behind the administrative building that abutted the southern edge of the sports ground.

By now it was clear to Sheonan that the administrative building was occupied by well-armed LTTE fighters. Unwilling to move through a built-up area, Sheonan decided to approach the LTTE headquarters by taking a detour towards the railway track that lay to the west of the sports ground, and he sent a patrol to check out the route.

Sheonan then took a headcount of his men and found he was one man short. The nursing assistant told Sheonan that the doctor was missing. 'I knew where he would be. I told the nursing assistant that he must have dozed off. We went back to the dugout where we had taken positions, and there he was, fast asleep, amidst all the firing! Doctor was that kind of character,' Sheonan recalls with a chuckle.

The patrol came back with an all-clear report for the route they would follow.

The para commandos moved stealthily towards their target. They had so far suffered no losses, and they had a firm plan of action.

It was now 3.45 a.m. The darkness of night was slowly giving way to the first signs of dawn. Barely had the para commandos moved 150 metres when they came under heavy fire from Kokuvil railway station. They responded by firing five rounds from their Karl Gustav rocket launchers, a weapon used mainly against tanks.

Through his night vision device, Sheonan could see a big group of LTTE fighters moving from the railway station towards the road the para commandos were supposed to take. The firing became intense. In trying to take cover, the para commandos crossed the railway line and spotted a single-storey house with a boundary wall and a small iron gate a few yards to the west of the railway station.

The house had a sloping roof of clay tiles popular in that area. They knocked on the door, which was opened by a middle-aged man. Communicating in a mixture of Tamil and broken English, he told Sheonan he was a professor at the local polytechnic. He said the LTTE leadership did not stay the night in the building he was planning to attack, but functioned from there only during the day. At night, Prabhakaran and others slept in a house a couple of hundred yards away. The old man

cautioned Sheonan: the para commandos would easily be outnumbered by the 100–150 LTTE fighters that guarded Prabhakaran at any given time, he said.

Dismissing his advice, Sheonan decided to head to the house Prabhakaran was said to be sleeping in. But they didn't trust the professor. He was asked to suggest three routes, and the para commandos picked one – if he was leading them into a trap where the LTTE had laid an ambush, Sheonan reasoned, he would have insisted on one route. Sheonan then told the professor to guide them to the house. To make doubly sure that they were not walking into a trap, Nair put an additional condition. In his broken Tamil, he told the professor that his son-in-law would be walking with them as a hostage, with a para commando pointing his loaded rifle at the back of his head. If they came under fire, the son-in-law would be shot dead.

As soon as they left the professor's house, the para commandos came under fire from three directions, and the leading commando was hit.

Sheonan says that Nair's aim was only to threaten the professor but the para commando took the order literally. 'We felt very bad about it,' he says. 'We didn't believe the

professor deliberately misled us. But such things happen in the heat of battle.'

Bhadauria noticed that a para commando had been shot in the thigh and was writhing in pain. He identified the hut from which the firing had come, 70 metres behind them, and ordered his rocket launcher team to target it. As three rounds hit the hut, the firing stopped, but the wails and screams of the women and children inside could be heard.

Although the professor had pointed them towards one house, the para commandos were now being fired upon from a group of houses. Intelligence reports later revealed that Prabhakaran used to sleep in a different house every night. That night, he had moved out of the Kokuvil East area at 4.15 a.m., when the first rounds were fired on the para commandos from the Kokuvil railway station.

But Sheonan didn't know it then. The intense firing continued as they made their way to Pirampadi Lane, about 500 metres from the professor's house. This was a pleasant neighbourhood, with houses lining both sides of the twenty-foot lane. As they entered the lane Sheonan and Bhadauria came under fire from a house 20 metres ahead. Their sten machine carbines firing, they charged towards the door of the house. A man came out of the house and rushed towards them, and when he was barely three feet away, in a reflex action, Sheonan fired and hit

What happened thereafter has given Bhadauria many sleepless night

The para commandos now stormed into six neighbouring houses on either side of Pirampadi Lane and took up positions there. These were mostly pucca houses, single-storey, with sloping tiled roofs, similar to the polytechnic professor's house. Sheonan gathered the family members of each house into one room in their respective houses. He chose rooms that did not face the road, and told the families to take their rations with

them. The families were not to venture out of that room, unless instructed by the para commandos. 'By night, either we will all leave or we will all be dead,' Sheonan told them.

The LTTE fighters were holed up inside other houses in the area. The para commandos were under siege, caught in a hail of bullets from the surrounding houses.

This was the first time in his life that Sheonan had come under effective fire. Quickly assessing the situation, he distributed his men among the houses they were occupying. Sheonan and the doctor stayed in the central building where a medical post was set up to treat the wounded. Nair and Bhadauria were sent to the houses on the two extremities. With greater situational awareness and the advantage of daylight, the para commandos took up positions at the windows and ventilators of the houses, and started returning fire. Sheonan looked at his watch. It was now 6.20 a.m.

Three things were uppermost in Sheonan's mind: 'First, protect my chaps – I didn't want to lose any men. Second, fulfil the operational task of destroying the LTTE headquarters. And third, avoid killing any more civilians while doing this.'



By 5.30 a.m., Sheonan's CO, Dalbir Singh, who had been at the Indian high commission in Colombo, had flown to Palali, determined to join his unit which was in the thick of battle. The firefight between the 103 para commandos and the LTTE fighters was relentless. The morning sun had given way to dark clouds which threatened heavy showers, but the two sides seemed undeterred. Sheonan saw young men come on bicycles, join the LTTE fighters, take positions, join the firefight and then go back. He estimated that they were surrounded by 450 to 500 LTTE fighters, a number confirmed by intelligence reports later.

The para commandos suffered their first casualties within an hour: three of them were hit by bursts from LTTE fighters. One of them, receiving three bullets on his chest, died instantly. The other two succumbed to their injuries a few hours later. Through the ventilator, Sheonan shot dead the man who had got the three para commandos. Then he ran through a hail of bullets to pick up the dead fighter's G3 rifle from the lane. He discarded his highly unreliable Sten carbine and started firing with the German-made rifle as it used the same 7.62mm ammunition used in the Indian rifles.

As the para commandos had brought the surplus ammunition of two door loads with them, they didn't have to worry about conserving ammunition.

The threatened downpour did not come, and the firing continued. Bhadauria, in the last house in Pirampadi Lane, had a lucky escape when a bullet hit the chair he had vacated just a second earlier. Later, spotting a group of LTTE fighters in an open space between two houses in the lane, Bhadauria and his men let loose a barrage of fire, and killed twelve of them.



Meanwhile, what was happening with Birendra Singh and his men?

Till around 10.30 a.m., the para commandos could hear the sound of firing from the Jaffna University ground, particularly of the MMG being fired by the Sikh LI. Suddenly, the MMG stopped firing – and then the sound of MMG firing appeared closer. This was ominous – it could mean only one thing. Sheonan's next radio message to Palali base relayed the tragedy in a short, terse sentence: 'The MMG from the university ground is now firing at us. Major Birendra and all his men are dead.'

As Sheonan had feared when he left Birendra Singh behind, the infantrymen had been overwhelmed by LTTE firing after dawn broke: picked off by LTTE snipers, twenty-seven of them, including Birendra Singh, had been killed and only three were alive. These three

decided that their best chance of survival was to launch an assault and recapture the MMG lost to the LTTE. So, giving their remaining ammunition to Sepoy Gora Singh, who would provide covering fire with his rifle, two of them led a bayonet charge on the LTTE men holding the MMG. This was like a throwback to battles fought a century ago, when soldiers, having expended their ammunition, fixed their bayonets to their rifles and charged the enemy in a final act of desperation.

The two men were shot and Sepoy Gora Singh was captured alive by the LTTE – probably because the LTTE were keen to learn from him how to operate weapons such as the rocket launcher they had captured from the IPKF in the past few days. (Gora Singh was released in November 1988 in an exchange of prisoners between the LTTE and the IPKF, and continued to serve in the 13 Sikh LI.)

The Sri Lankan army, which had constantly been monitoring both the IPKF and the LTTE radio networks, had a pretty good idea of how Birendra Singh and his infantrymen, as well as Sheonan and his para commandos, were faring. In its assessment of the tragedy, it concluded that the infantrymen had been airdropped without proper briefing about the terrain they would land in, or warning about the LTTE's firepower and tactics. The Indian army's official report, though it acknowledges

that Birendra Singh's men 'put up a gallant fight for hours unmindful of LTTE demand to surrender', blames them as they 'did not prepare the defences during the night and therefore, on 12 October at dawn, came under accurate fire from the buildings dominating the LZ [landing zone] area'. The title of the paragraph in this report says it all: The Disaster.



The fierce gunfight between the LTTE and Sheonan and his men continued in Pirampadi Lane. The two sides were separated by barely 40 metres at places, and not a minute passed without at least three or four bursts of AK-47 or G3 fire being heard. While the LTTE were able to move in and out of the area, the para commandos were pinned down inside the houses.

Every hour, a group of fifteen to twenty LTTE fighters would try to storm one of the houses. Dressed in their lungis, they would assault the house from three sides, firing and shouting at the top of their voices. Bhadauria had beaten back one such assault, as had the other para commandos, but Sheonan realized around 10 a.m. that more effective firepower was needed. He decided to call for artillery fire to target the houses from which the LTTE were firing on his men.

An artillery gun can be fired from kilometres away. The person firing doesn't see the target, but calculates the path and the trajectory of the shell based on the position of the target on a map. When the first shell lands, someone present close to the target gives 'corrections' for the subsequent firing – say, 50 metres north, 100 metres east and so on. Depending on the type of artillery gun, a target in a range of up to 35 kilometres can be aimed at.

Sheonan knew that 54 Artillery Brigade was at Palali, with its guns. But as soon as he requested for artillery fire, he received a shock: the artillery brigade had brought the guns to Sri Lanka but not the ammunition for it.

Sheonan looks shocked and incredulous as he recalls, 'Even when we go for exercises, we carry training ammunition so that soldiers are comfortable handling live ammunition. Here we were, deployed overseas, and there was no artillery ammunition whatsoever.'

Fortunately, the Sri Lankan army came to the rescue. They had three tubes of 120mm mortars at Jaffna Fort. A mortar is a smaller version of the artillery gun but it is not on wheels and has a shorter range. A crew from the Sri Lankan army engineers was manning these mortars.

But one problem remained. There were no common gridded military maps available with the IPKF's Division HQ, the Sri Lankan army mortar detachment and

Sheonan to guide the mortar fire to the correct spot. So Division HQ decided to send Major Chaudhary, an army pilot, in his Chetak helicopter, with a map, to hover over Sheonan's location and pass on the information to the Sri Lankans. However, Chaudhary didn't know exactly where the para commandos were.

Sheonan decided to indicate his location by using the most primitive method: fire and smoke. Taking a sari from the family, Sheonan's team doused it in kerosene, set it alight and put it on a stick atop the roof of the house occupied by them. Chaudhary saw the fire, and with his helicopter hovering over the house started talking to Sheonan using his radio set.

To give 'correction', Sheonan sent two of his para commandos to the roof of the house. It was going to be a three-way communication: para commandos on the roof to Sheonan, Sheonan inside the house to Chaudhary in the helicopter and, Chaudhary to the Sri Lankan army at Jaffna Fort, with all the attendant dangers of the message getting distorted – as in a game of Chinese whispers.

A Sri Lankan soldier fired the mortars, and the first round fell some distance away from the target. Based on the distances judged by the two para commandos on the roof, Sheonan relayed the corrections: 100 metres north and 50 metres east. The maps were not needed any more. The rounds were landing closer to the

target. As Chaudhary's helicopter was running low on fuel, he returned to Palali. So Sheonan started directly communicating via his radio set with the Sri Lankan soldiers. And then he gave this one 'correction'.

'I didn't know that I could give a correction of up to 25 metres for the mortar. I thought the minimum I could pass was in multiples of 50 metres,' Sheonan recounts. To get closer to the houses from which they were directly under fire, he passed a correction of 50 metres south. This turned out to be disastrous: the next shell landed at the buildings the para commandos were in.

Gangaram, a para commando positioned on the roof to judge the accuracy of the falling shells, lost his right leg as the shell fell. Havaladar Devi Singh, his detachment commander, ran towards him but before he could reach him Gangaram put the barrel of his rifle to his own chest, and pressed the trigger.

The same shell also sliced off the hip of Umesh, Sheonan's helper. The doctor asked Sheonan whether he should try to save the heavily bleeding Umesh, which would entail the use of much of the bandage and medicine supplies, leaving hardly anything for further casualties.

'Don't ask me. Take a practical decision, take a medical call. If the choice is between saving one life or saving ten lives, we must save ten lives,' Sheonan told the doctor. The doctor made his choice. He used the saris and lungis

available in the house as dressing to plug the bleeding but to no avail. Umesh was in great pain. He died two hours later. Sheonan doesn't wear his emotions on his sleeve, nor is he given to self-doubt or regretful reflection. Looking back on what must have been a traumatic experience – his mistake leading to the death of two of his men – he says in his typically laconic way: 'When you are in the thick of operations, casualties don't affect you. The incident hit me two days later. And I felt bad about the mistake in directing the mortar. My regret was that had I been trained to take an "artillery shoot", I would have known about the 25 metres correction.'

The mortar shelling, though it had cost two lives among the para commandos, had done its job. At around 11 a.m., the LTTE called up the Division HQ at Palali asking for the mortar shelling to be stopped as they had lost forty men and wanted to evacuate their casualties. Two mortar shells had landed on target. The Division HQ informed Sheonan of this communication.

With three of his men dead, Sheonan was in no mood to negotiate with the enemy, and called for more mortar fire from the Sri Lankan army. But the Sri Lankan soldier told him that he had only three rounds left on each of the three mortar tubes. Sheonan asked the Division HQ if they had mortar ammunition which could be given to the Sri Lankans. Division HQ replied it had not brought

any mortar ammunition either from India. Sheonan chose to keep the nine rounds with the Sri Lankan army as a reserve for an emergency.

The LTTE fighters were no longer being targeted by mortar fire, and the firefight between the para commandos and the LTTE continued. By 3 p.m., Sheonan had reorganized his team, and now they were occupying only five houses. To bring his men out of the sixth house, he ran through heavy fire from the LTTE, and once again emerged miraculously unscathed.

Sheonan had yet another lucky escape shortly afterwards. Standing behind Para Commando Manohar, who was firing with his rifle through a window, he had just turned around to exit the room when a 40mm grenade hit the wall behind him. His back and neck were full of splinters and pellets, which came to light only when he went to the doctor with a high fever a few days later. Most of the splinters were too close to his backbone and remain there to this day. But Manohar died a few minutes later, at the same spot, when a bullet went through his mouth and his head.

Having lost many men in their attempts to capture the houses occupied by the para commandos, the LTTE stopped their assault at around 4 p.m. except for stray firing now and then. But a freak accident turned the day even more nightmarish for Sheonan and his

men, still holed up in those five houses on Pirampadi Lane.

As a para commando fired his rocket launcher – which is normally fired in an open area – from a window in one of the houses the back-blast brought down the partition wall behind him and the roof of one room caved in. This was where the residents of that house had been told to take shelter. All seven members of the family died instantly.

Across the lane, at the centre of the buildings from where the LTTE were firing, a lone hut prominently stood out from the rest of the pucca houses. Although no one had fired from there, Sheonan's men were keen to destroy the hut as it presented an easy target, but he stopped them. 'We might need that hut at night to indicate our location to someone. We can set it alight then,' he told his men. He turned out to be prescient.

As the evening gave way to night and the skies opened up, the LTTE's lack of night-fighting capability became obvious. If Sheonan and his men had to get out, they needed to escape then, under the cover of darkness. They, however, had a problem: six men dead and fourteen wounded. Sheonan told Palali base that it was not possible for them to fight their way back to Palali with all their dead and wounded comrades – at best they could carry six of the wounded but the rest would have to be left behind,