

# THE LORDS OF LOADS...

*in war and peace....*



By : Nilakshi Gunatillake

The history of the No.02 Heavy Transport Squadron of Sri Lanka Air Force is an epic tale – told and re told by many history books, yet oft forgotten and seldom spoken of. The essence within the squadron is far too intense and vibrant to fit into a few hundred words here. But one mission after another, each different to the other, and the ingenuity of the men in the squadron have gradually facilitated the evolution of the squadron from the proverbial 'workhorse' to a well-oiled and versatile force to reckon with. Its name belies its depth and those whose lives have been touched by the squadron still fondly call them... the Lords...the Lords of Loads.

The writer speaks to men within the squadron, then and now, and also to those whose lives have changed with the touch of No.02. All such voices echo the value of the work of 'the Lords', be it in war or peace; come rain or shine!

The No.02 Heavy Transport Squadron was established in 1957 and is tasked with carrying out Troops/Cargo Transportation, Casualty Evacuation, Aerial Reconnaissance and Aerial Photography. It is the pioneer flying formation of the SLAF and was the mother squadron for No.01 Flying Training Wing, No.04 Helicopter Squadron and No.08 Light Transport Squadron. Serving the Nation for the past 52 years, it was involved in all major military operations and was the sole lifeline of the Jaffna Peninsular for a long period. Many types of aircraft came under the inventory of No.02 at different points of time including, Doves, Herons, Y 8s, Y12s, Cessna 337s, and AVROs. Presently Antonov AN 32Bs and Hercules C 130s and a Cessna Golden Eagle belonging to the Survey Department fly out of the Squadron's shelter. It logs more than 50% of the bulk of flying done in the SLAF. 30 gallant officers and men of this Squadron have laid down their lives while serving the Nation.



## Growing, Learning and Pulling together

With the ever changing scenarios of the country SLAF was called upon with very short notice to perform many duties that they were least trained and ill equipped for. No.02 Squadron, too, operated thus, erred, learnt and succeeded.

Within every theatre of war the ability and versatility of men of No.02 Squadron have been proved. Then, in 1984, to and from Jaffna, the Cessna 337 carrying four passengers, five days a week, fulfilled the air transportation requirement. The balance troop requirement was taken care of by a highly operative A-9 and a long and winding 'Yal Devi' filled with the deep voices of soldiers. However, this gradually increased and evolved. With the A9 closed for years and 'Yal Devi' long gone, the need became crucial and these demands were dedicatedly and efficiently met by the Squadron. In between were spells, especially before dedicated attack and fighter platforms were developed within SLAF, where the Squadron's fleet was also called upon to act as 'bombers' and gun ships. There were instances where the Y8 that carried troops to Jaffna from Colombo, had bombs loaded on them and used as 'bombers.' Targets achieved, the Y8 would again turn around, packed with troops, and head for Colombo or Anuradhapura. When such offensives were absolutely required, there were moments when guns were put on AVROs and the troops carriers improvised and used as gun ships for the mission.

During Eelam War IV the commitment and dedication of the Lords enabled not merely the role of SLAF, but the total military effort of the country. War arenas were in dire need of troops and evacuation of casualties was crucial. Carrying 1000 soldiers to the North and bringing another 1000 back home daily was no mean feat. With only two serviceable aircrafts with a total capacity of 140 passengers, the task entailed six shuttles per day for the squadron. The men within the squadron are proud of the fact that they breathed life into thousands of casualties by evacuating them from war torn areas. These areas hardly had safe and clear roads. Hence military equipment and hardware had to be transported mostly by the No.02 Squadron. All this while the Jaffna peninsular was sealed off and its lifeline was the operations of No.02. The soldiers in the peninsular had only MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) and their fresh rations were flown in daily by the aircraft operated by No.02. The daily news papers flown in were eagerly awaited by the soldiers and gave them the touch of reality and a sense of 'home' that was crucial during a battle. When Palali came under artillery attack, the Squadron flew at night, goods were unloaded and troops and casualties loaded in the thick of night, with the aid of the beams of hand held torches.



AVRO AIR CRAFT

Reconnaissance (recce) was another responsibility of the Squadron. Especially when the Beech craft dedicated for recce became unserviceable for a few hours or a few days. During such times the Squadron also chipped in for extra vigilance to the voyage of the Jetliner, carrying 3000 troops onboard. There were also spells that the Jetliner did not operate due to very high sea tiger threats. Then the carriage of the additional 3000 troops, too, was superbly handled by No.02 Squadron.



With this enormous commitment and the dedication of all within the squadron, all was well, one would have expected. But as any other 'living' flying Squadron, No.02, too, had its share of issues. As targets after targets were lined up neck to neck, as pilots flew shuttle after shuttle, they were literally living in the sky. Their tasks were time consuming and 'never ending.' The pilots surpassed all norms of 'recommended' flying hours and flew through rain or shine and night or light. The engineering and maintenance crew pitched in with all their knowledge, skill and hearts for the Squadron to excel, SLAF to serve and the country to win. As always, true professionalism triumphed and the Squadron overcame issues of varying sizes and depth.

Battles apart, the Squadron was in the forefront in responding to natural calamities. Hundreds and thousands of kilograms of fresh and dry rations, medical supplies and living essentials have been transported with the true spirit of a professional Squadron of a professional Force. The squadron also perfectly carried out the VIP/VVIP movements right through till to date.



# Moments of Despair

May and June 1995 were dark days for the Squadron. The 'birdies' they flew, though graceful, were huge and slow sitting ducks to the newly emerged threat of missiles. This vulnerability was one reason why they were targeted and hit by the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But the main reason was to isolate and suffocate the Jaffna peninsular, by severing its lifeline- the air transportation capability of the country. Such was the indispensability of the squadron – the LTTE identified it then.



'Old hands' remember the deep pain they felt when the AVROs their colleagues flew- one of them the Commanding Officer (CO) himself- fell prey to the killer missiles, along with military and civilian passengers. They remember walking into the 'Ops Room' to find brother pilots staring into empty space. The responsibility of commanding the Squadron and keeping up the spirit and the morale of the men during the anguish was a colossal challenge to the new CO whose duties were thrust upon him the moment the first AVRO crashed. Uncertainty ruled the hours, none of the pilots refused to fly; yet, they wanted re-assurance, clarity and support from the hierarchy. This they got. During this crisis, too, true military professionalism emerged.

Do's and don'ts and can's and cannot's were dissected, scrutinized and re-scrutinized; pros and cons were weighed and re-weighed. Requests and queries were sent to HQ speedily and approvals and clarifications were acceded with equal speed. A prompt response and dynamic solutions were required. A Nation waited breathlessly and looked upon SLAF to restore the 'missile hit and injured' pride of the Nation and reconnection to the Northern peninsular. At that moment of time, only the recommencement of operations of No.02 Squadron would have ensured this restoration. With the maturity of years gained in a few days, strategies drawn, evasive tactics communicated, morale and spirits as good as ever, No.02 recommenced its operations. As the captain and the co pilot glided the first aircraft out of the shelters of the squadron, many hearts were a-flutter with apprehension.

## Standing Ovation

Flying well above missile range, changing the so-used-to routes and tactically evading threatening environs the aircraft packed with troops and cargo for the peninsular, landed at Palaly. It is said that as this aircraft slowly taxied and came to a halt on the runway, all officers and men within the premises and soldiers flocking the airport for the past few days and even those manning the control tower, stood up and cheered: many with tears rolling down their cheeks. Peninsular re-connected, Nation's injured pride restored, apprehension overcome, threat evaded, the Squadron truly deserved this standing ovation.



## Maestro Flying

It requires a highly competent pilot to negotiate a huge aircraft onto a short runway. It takes a maestro to transform this risky landing into a safe landing, through artillery infested and missile existent environment. This was the case for long years in Palali. Right throughout all aircraft that landed in Palali took evasive action against missile threats and flew in heights that were pre-determined as a safe range from missiles. However, when the moment came to land in Palali, the maestros went in for a tactical and deep descent, dropped thousands of feet in less than 4 to 5 minutes. Evading killer missiles, dropping down enemy environment within a few minutes and concurrently protecting troops, the machine and essential cargo was no easy task.



urgent military equipment requirement of the Sri Lanka Military. While flying into other countries and strange air fields the common practice is for the relevant pilots to have simulator training, pre air field approach training and basic language training. However, due to the urgency of the requirements, none of the above was carried out. The experience and skill of the Squadron's pilots stood out and these missions never failed.

The Squadron has answered the Nation's call very, many times. Apart from responding and supporting the Humanitarian efforts during the earthquake calamity in Pakistan, the pilots and maintenance personnel have flown to China, Bulgaria, Pakistan and Ukraine. These flights were carried out to replenish the

## Silent Chivalry of the Lords...

An army officer remembers seeing an AVRO drawn on a wall of a soldiers' billet, beneath the drawing had been the words, "the God that carries me home!" Thus the squadron was revered by soldiers. The soldier was then fighting in pockets of a territory totally sealed off from the mainland. The sound of any aircraft gave him the strength to hang on and move forward. Yet, the whirr of the machines of the huge aircraft gave him the knowledge that he can go back home, this strengthened him to never give up!

The writer once met a mother who had flown in her tiny, few-days-old infant, from Jaffna to Colombo. At the height of war aircraft operated by No.02 was their only way out of Jaffna. The support she and her husband received from SLAF pilots on their way will always be

remembered and appreciated. The pilots had gone to the extent of finding cotton wool for the ears of the infant, fearing the consequences of height on the delicate eardrums. Their constant concern throughout the flight made the parents and the infant feel so much at home. "Gentle Giants," the teary eyed mother tremulously added. The pilots were so big in her eyes and as gentle!

Soldiers, who have been injured and brought for medical attention on flights operated by No.02 Squadron, spoke highly of the attention and care they received on board. The way the pilots took extra care and their gentleness while flying have indeed earned them many a tribute. They ensured smooth take off and landing and keeping in mind the status of the injured, maintained safe heights that would prevent the trigger off of acute blood pressure and bleeding. Special praise was also given to loadmasters who turned doctors on board while plying innumerable casualties from the battlefields.

Pilots who fly certain types of aircraft carry with them portable bottles of oxygen that are used when the levels of oxygen fluctuate. The oxygen is provided for the safety of the pilots, but there had been instances where the bottles were handed over to casualties who took a turn for the worse while on board. Many a life has been saved thus and these pilots will be forever remembered and appreciated.



## Never ending.... the load the glory...

The squadron's operations room is still filled with a constant whirr of SOS calls, the voices of pilots and an incessant communication with the central Air Operations personnel and Air Traffic Control towers. No.02 is called upon to perform in war and peace. It always was the bridge in the sky, connecting the isolated Jaffna peninsular with the South. The Lords' load will never end, neither will their glory. As the country moves onto a more peaceful era, the hope of the people of the country will reverberate in the roar of the AN 32s and the C 130s that would continue to connect and reconnect the North, East, West and South of Sri Lanka.