URBAN WARFARE:

Experiences and Lessons from Batticaloa, Eastern Sri Lanka

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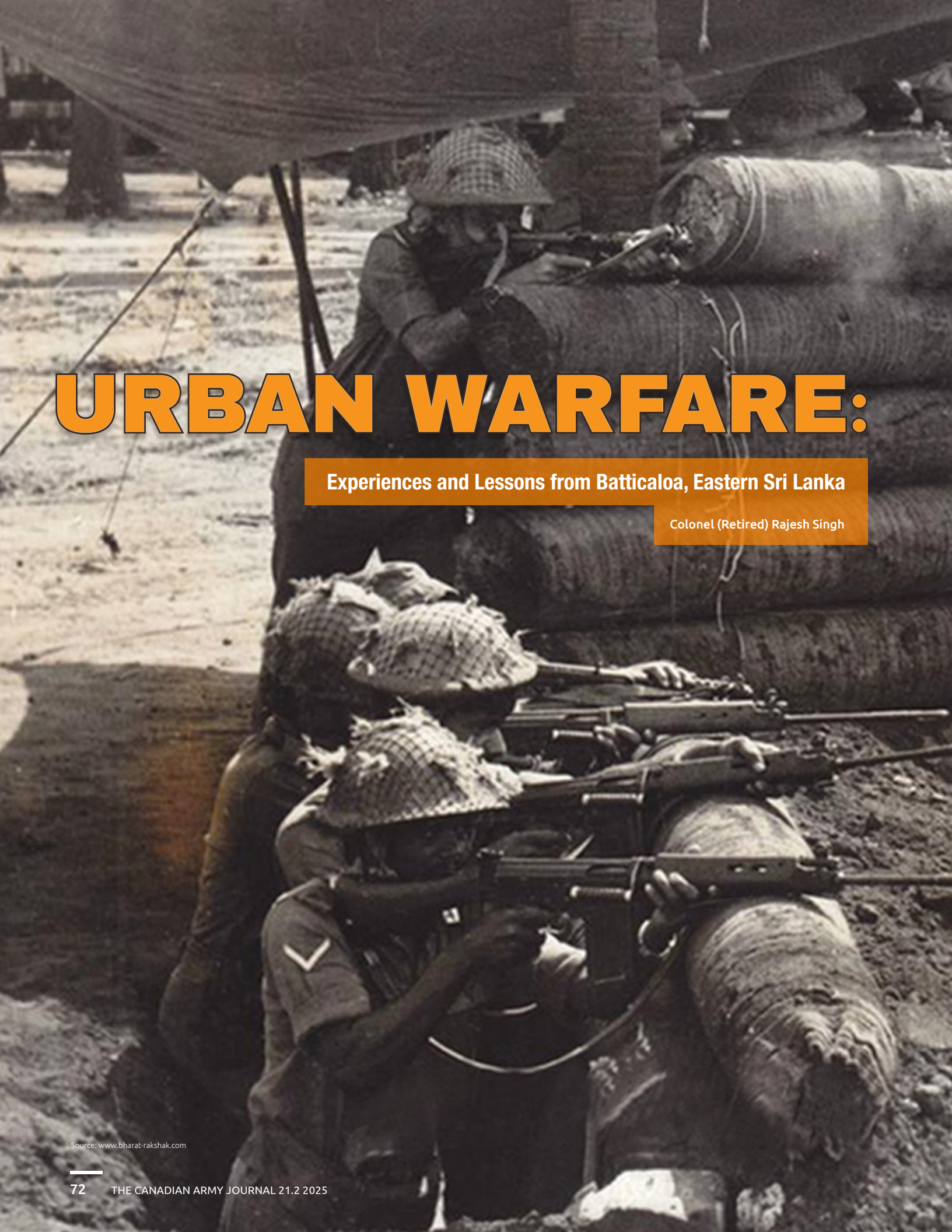

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BACKGROUND

Ethnic tensions and the rise of Tamil separatism

In its post-colonial history in South Asia, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) had predominantly evolved as a Sinhalese Buddhist state. However, substantial minorities that included ethnic Tamils and Muslims inhabited the northern and eastern regions. Many Tamils were brought to the island during British colonial rule to work on tea plantations. Over time, demands for greater agency in local affairs and autonomy from the Tamil community transformed into calls for an independent Tamil Eelam, covering the northern and eastern provinces. By the 1980s there were several active and armed Tamil secessionist groups. Eventually, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the dominant force led by its iconic leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE consolidated power by eliminating rival groups and became the central figure in the demand for a Tamil homeland.

Decades of ethnic tension between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Tamil minority who faced discrimination and marginalization led to a violent struggle, attracting international attention. With its ethnic and cultural ties to the Tamil population, India intervened diplomatically throughout the 1980s, which made it an emotive and politically sensitive issue. The LTTE also received political and material support from Western countries, driven by humanitarian concerns and a desire to prevent the oppression of minorities. Also, India advocated for greater devolution of power and autonomy to the Tamil-majority provinces, a stance formalized in the India–Sri Lanka Accord of 1987. This agreement led to the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to the island nation, marking a significant chapter in the conflict.

Deployment of the IPKF to Sri Lanka

The IPKF was a contingent of the Indian Army deployed under the India–Sri Lanka Accord and was tasked with overseeing the implementation of the agreement, maintaining peace, and assisting the Sri Lankan Army in securing the surrender of LTTE weapons. Notably, the division-sized force was not meant to undertake combat operations. While the LTTE did surrender some of its weapons, it retained most of the sophisticated arms and ammunition. Prabhakaran felt betrayed by New Delhi's intervention and opposed the provisions of the India–Sri Lanka Accord. As a result, the group waited for an opportunity to launch violent actions against both the Indian and Sri Lankan armies. When the LTTE launched a series of attacks against the

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security forces that also resulted in civilian casualties, the IPKF was caught off guard. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, most of the areas outside IPKF camps had been heavily mined by the LTTE, leading to heavy initial casualties for the Indian Army. However, the Indian forces quickly adapted and, by the end of their deployment in 1990, when the IPKF had grown into a formidable force of five divisions, the LTTE had been largely pushed onto the defensive. Despite this, the IPKF's withdrawal in 1990 reinvigorated the LTTE and led to a resumption of the civil war. This conflict continued until Prabhakaran's death in May 2009, exacting a heavy toll on both sides.

URBAN OPERATIONS IN BATTICALOA

A personal narrative

This narrative is based on operations conducted by the author as a rifle company commander in the urban environment of Batticaloa (eastern Sri Lanka), where he served with the IPKF during Operation Pawan (1987–1990). The author has selected incidents that are both instructive and serve as a benchmark for operations in complex, high-intensity environments. While the LTTE is utilized as a professional example, the intent is not to comment on the political or ideological nature of the group, but rather to shed light on the complexities of urban operations and to provide professional insights that can be applied to any adversary in similar operational conditions. The author seeks to highlight the challenges faced during urban operations, particularly the advantages that an invisible adversary—whether termed as a terrorist, militant or insurgent—may have, and how to negate them.

Even at the time, there were many manuals and counter-insurgency schools that taught arious tactics and techniques for urban operations. The author has had no disagreement with those resources. However, when it came to operations in the urban environment of Batticaloa, the author's focus shifted to understanding the local geography—both the

physical terrain and the people living within it—as the key determinant for success. As violent engagements and improvised explosive devices (IED) became more prominent, the author found little use for the pamphlets that had been provided as essential reading for operations in such terrain. The reason was simple: those pamphlets were written within idealized conditions, which quickly became less relevant the moment the first shots were fired or an IED was detonated.

The author participated in operations across both sea and jungle terrains, but those two geographical contexts will only be discussed insofar as they impacted operations in the urban environment. The Batticaloa district itself spanned 2,854 square kilometres and had a population of approximately 400,000 in the 1980s. The town of Batticaloa extended 10 km in the north–south direction and 5 km in the east–west. On the east lies the sea, and to the west are the lagoons and jungles, thus constituting the ingress and egress routes into the urban environment for the militant. The spread and varying density of the population inside the town (which was upwards of 70,000 people in 1987) was the key terrain—the battlefield, a space for contest between the militant and the counter-insurgents.

Lesson 1: Separating the militant or insurgent from the population requires multiple units

Before entering an urban environment as large as Batticaloa, a large-scale force—such as two brigades or a full division—should ideally conduct cordon and search operations. This serves not only to separate insurgents from the local population but also to prevent the urban area from becoming a stronghold, bastion town, or launching point for further operations within or beyond the area.

However, the battalion did not have the luxury of such numbers at that time. The first division-sized combined arms search and destroy operations were only possible in February 1988, five months after the battalion's initial induction, when three additional divisions were deployed to the north and east. The challenge of operating with insufficient forces raised critical questions about how the lack of numbers affected the operations and what alternative strategies could be employed in such circumstances. Referring to T. E. Lawrence's well-known observation that insurgencies are fueled by a small percentage of active insurgents within the population, it becomes evident that both insurgents and counter-insurgents will naturally vie for control of urban environments where the majority of the population resides.[1] Therefore, counter-insurgency operations must ideally begin by targeting urban centres and expelling insurgents from these areas with units large enough to complete the task.

Source: www.bharat-rakshak.com

Lesson 2: Urban operations require high numbers of personnel within those units

Building on the earlier observation, a key aspect in understanding the nature of these operations is the changing context from the battalion's initial induction to its eventual de-induction. Initially, the battalion was part of a brigade, which included three battalions and covered an area stretching from Punanai in the northern part of Sri Lanka to Ampara in the south, a distance of 115 km. This brigade was part of a single infantry division deployed for operations in the north and east of Sri Lanka. However, as resistance stiffened and operations did not achieve the desired momentum and results, three additional divisions were deployed to increase operational efficiency in the region. This shift in scale is significant, as the number of forces involved can heavily influence decisions regarding the scope and approach to urban operations.

If you do not have the personnel numbers, there are adequate spaces available to the insurgent to execute offensive operations. The enemy may be all-pervasive and initiate the "everywhere and anywhere" phenomenon. We were soon to feel the impact of this challenge. On 20 October 1987, an IED detonated on one of the roads leading into the urban area, killing 21 soldiers from a neighbouring rifle company as they traveled in vehicles. The inability to clear the urban centre and areas around it as a result of a paucity of numbers allowed freedom of movement to the LTTE, who surreptitiously planted an IED under a culvert.

Lesson 3: Circumvent the IED threat

The threat of IEDs posed a significant and persistent danger to operations, making it crucial to develop effective strategies to detect and neutralize this threat before it could inflict casualties or disrupt missions. Prior to the detonation on 20 October 1987, the insurgent had dug an IED into the muddy-soft side of the culvert and laid a wire hundred metres away from the spot, using the tall lagoon grass for concealment. Once the vehicle was on top of the culvert, the insurgent manually activated the IED.

The incident highlighted critical vulnerabilities in operations security and prompted a revision in tactics. It became clear that, before any vehicular or convoy movement, troops on the ground had to not only look for the IED but also the location of the person who would activate it. In response, the author implemented a standard operating procedure that involved having an engineer representative along with an assistant, a radio operator, and two escorts. They moved along the road with electronic detectors to locate any IEDs. Meanwhile, the rifle company—at the section or platoon level, depending on the length of the road—would advance 200–300 metres on either side to flush out any insurgents waiting in ambush.

The IED blast brought a heightened sense of caution to operations. From that point on vehicles would only be used in emergencies or as load carriers for logistics and would be escorted by walking personnel flanking the convoys. This

approach came to be known as "walking convoys" and remained in place until February 1988, when additional personnel were brought in. Despite the challenges, the principle that infantry is safest on foot proved to be true, both then and now and regardless of the available numbers. This brings us to another critical aspect of operational agility.

Lesson 4: Employ the agility, mobility and the effectiveness of dismounted infantry

There is no doubt that a lightly armed and equipped infantry soldier is more effective than one burdened with heavy gear. For example, a soldier equipped with a Kevlar helmet, personal weapons and ammunition, body armour protecting the front and crotch, and small-arms protective inserts for the front, back, and sides, carries a total weight of around 60 pounds. In any operational context—whether it be area domination or a search and destroy mission— a soldier carrying 60 pounds would prefer vehicular mobility over dismounted mobility. However, it is also evident that, despite the weight, a dismounted soldier is often safer and more effective in operations, both in urban environments and jungle terrain.

Given that the battalion's area of responsibility spanned the entire Batticaloa and Ampara districts—which covered a distance of 110 km from Punanai in the north to Ampara town in the south—the importance of lightly armed, dismounted infantry became critical. This approach proved vital in operations such as performing road-opening from Punanai to Ampara, carrying out rail-opening from Punanai to Batticaloa, securing vulnerable areas, and conducting search and destroy missions, cordon-and-search operations, multiple patrols, area clearance operations, and intelligence-based operations, which included nighttime operations. In such large, IED-infested terrains, it was clear that vehicle-borne columns would not have been safe or effective. Likewise, heavily burdened infantry could not have operated continuously, day and night, with the same level of safety and effectiveness.

Lesson 5: Approach and move through towns in multiple "rods"

Although the battalion was initially thin on the ground and the LTTE was omnipresent in the town, the latter was likely spread thin as well and numbered in the dozens rather than the hundreds. Like the battalion, the LTTE could not be strong everywhere. Understanding the mindset and tactics of the insurgents, it became clear that they would also be concerned about being outflanked or surrounded. As a result, the author's method for operating within urban environments was straightforward: never advance in single file. Instead, the approach was to advance towards a target or objective in multiple "rods" of foot infantry spread across 400–500 yards. This strategy ensured that LTTE snipers or hit teams would always have their flanks threatened. While they could take a shot or two, they risked being cut off and neutralized. This created caution and doubt in the insurgent's mind, often forcing them to hold their fire.

Lesson 6: Exercise strict fire control
In an urban environment, it was very difficult to locate the exact point from where fire had been opened by the insurgent. Bullets always appeared to be aimed at you and made sounds that appeared to come from all directions, which tended to impose extreme caution. So, in response to a few shots, if every soldier in the section, platoon or company thought that they had been fired at, the complete section joined the firefight, inadvertently disrupting their own fire-and-move tactics meant to neutralize the insurgent threat.

On 26 January 1988, the rifle company stationed on Puliyantivu Island in Batticaloa was targeted in a heavy fire assault by the LTTE. Simultaneously, the LTTE surrounded a nearby police station and set fire to some shops in the vicinity. The commanding officer ordered the company to locate and neutralize the LTTE hit teams immediately. This required neutralizing the insurgents already firing at the company from multiple directions, then moving out of the company operating base and crossing over into the affected area through the only causeway that linked the island to the police station and surrounding areas. Drawing from past experience, the author anticipated that the causeway would be targeted if his company tried to cross it. As a result, a platoon was tasked with crossing the lagoon in boats to close in on the LTTE forces surrounding the police station.

Using effective fire-and-movement tactics, the platoon endeavoured to close the distance with the insurgents, with the light machine gun group covering the movement of the rifle section and vice versa. However, when they reached the point where the LTTE assault had originated, the position was abandoned. The platoon continued to move, shifting from one suspected insurgent position to the next, only to find each one similarly empty, despite enduring continuous fire. After several hours of this, the platoon had covered several square kilometres but still failed to establish contact with the LTTE.

As the platoon moved further, their efforts became painfully slow because of the heavy volume of fire. It was only after a few hours that the author realized the situation was more complicated: not only were the LTTE firing on their position, but other rifle companies from their own battalion stationed at the periphery of the operational area were also inadvertently engaging their troops—a case of "blue on blue on red" fire. The operation eventually culminated, but not before roughly 90,000 rounds were fired by the companies on the periphery. By contrast, the author's platoon in direct contact with the LTTE had only fired 200–300 rounds.

This experience underscored the critical importance of fire control, especially in an urban environment. Uncontrolled fire not only impairs and jeopardizes lives and one's own operations, it puts civilian lives at risk and also allows the insurgents to escape. In such environments, strict fire control is paramount to success.

Lesson 7: Conduct raids and selective cordon and search/destroy operations
In large-scale cordon and search operations, it was easy to lose the element of surprise, unless the objective was to simply flush out the insurgents and separate them from the population. In contrast, selective cordon and search operations in an urban environment involved less troop movement and left the insurgents guessing about the exact geographical limits of the cordon. This confusion encouraged them to seek refuge on the periphery of the cordon, where a cleverly positioned ambush could yield significant results.

In one such selective combined-arms search and destroy operation in Chantiveli, a satellite urban centre of Batticaloa, two insurgents were killed. Another selective cordon and search operation led to the capture of a key insurgent who provided vital information that resulted in raids on jungle hideouts and the recovery of a large cache of arms and ammunition.

One of the most significant outcomes of these selective cordon and search operations was the capture of the top LTTE leadership in Batticaloa during an important operation led by the author. This operation was based on intelligence provided by an informant, "Victor," the LTTE's finance secretary, who had been captured inside Batticaloa town. Victor was responsible for collecting taxes, and the author was able to surprise him with two vehicles approaching from opposite directions. While driving a light vehicle—a jeep—the author fired a few bursts near Victor's feet to prevent him from running and was able to capture him before he could escape.

When intelligence was reliable and good, a raid had to be planned with the minimum number of troops required to achieve surprise and maintain strict fire control—both in terms of movement and shooting. Speed of action and rapid movement left the enemy with few options, forcing them into a one-on-one confrontation. In one such raid, the author's team of just seven personnel established contact with the insurgents, blocked their exit, and initiated a firefight. The operation resulted in the death of four insurgents, including a leader named Arjun.

Lesson 8: Focus on terrain and flexibility in operational art

The urban concentration of Batticaloa was bordered by jungles to the west and the sea to the east. Ideally, all three geographical zones should have been treated as one unified area. Like a balloon, if pressure was applied to one point, it expanded in other directions. With sufficient forces, the entire geographical expanse would have to be controlled, and resources/numbers applied in unison. However, without the necessary numbers, applying force within the urban environment alone would have allowed insurgents to escape into the jungle or, to a lesser extent, the sea. A few strategically placed ambushes in the jungle, aligned with other urban operations, would have helped in making contact with insurgent groups attempting to flee. Still, it became clear from experience that, while some insurgents operated within the urban areas, large, organized groups—particularly from northern Sri Lanka—operated within the jungles.

To address this, the author sought and received permission from the commanding officer to launch operations in the adjacent jungle with the full rifle company. Knowing the insurgents' numerical superiority, the company was deployed with two platoons forward, each platoon moving in two sections, with the rifle company headquarters positioned between and behind the two platoons. After an hour or two of movement through the jungle, the company came across a river. The author immediately halted the company and initiated river crossing drills, which drew heavy automatic fire from the two extremities of the company's advance.

By adhering to rigid fire and control and fire and movement practices, the company was able to avoid walking into an ambush, and inflicted doubts in the mind of the insurgents about their potential for being outflanked. Despite these measures, the intensity and duration of the automatic fire continued. Based on this, the commanding officer agreed with the author's assessment that the insurgents were in far greater numbers and that continued engagement would likely lead to heavy casualties. As a result, orders were received to suspend the operation. This experience demonstrated the importance of flexibility in operational planning. If the insurgents had been blocking the approach to a critical area or passage, the operation would have continued. However, since the column was preparing to withdraw to its base within the urban area, the insurgent group could be dealt with more effectively in a different manner at a later time.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on key lessons from operations conducted within the urban areas of Batticaloa. The lessons identified in the article are critical for understanding the specific implications, impacts, and conclusions drawn from urban operations. It is evident that, with well-trained, lightly armed, and agile forces—whether dismounted or in vehicles—the results achieved can far exceed the resources invested. Creativity, imagination, and fearlessness are essential qualities for a commander, who must continually assess both the strength of the insurgent and their own forces before force application, and the manner in which force is applied.

The author takes great personal satisfaction from leading the rifle company during this period. The company earned 14 out of the 25 gallantry awards bestowed on the battalion and, remarkably, there were no casualties during the nearly two years of deployment (1987–89). Ensuring peace in Batticaloa by denying the LTTE the space to target civilians and minorities was deeply rewarding. The stabilization of the area around Batticaloa and Ampara even ensured the smooth conduct of elections, forming another success story.

Sometimes outnumbered, sometimes not, the company never felt outclassed. Soon after de-induction, it became apparent that political objectives may not have been fully met. However, military objectives were clear and successfully pursued. The primary goal was to engage the enemy—often unseen—and, when contact was made, ensure that they did not escape. The insurgent may not have a clear front, sides, or rear, but tactical manoeuvring helped create flanks and locate the enemy. Ultimately, this approach resulted in success and, in the author's view, victory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a captain and subsequent field major in the Indian Army, Rajesh Singh commanded two rifle companies of the 2nd Battalion of the Maratha Light Infantry, as well as a composite rifle company formed from sister infantry battalions in Operation Pawan (1987–89). He was awarded the Yudh Seva Medal (War Service Medal) for displaying outstanding leadership of a high order in numerous high-intensity operations. He later commanded the same battalion as a colonel in a counter-insurgency environment followed by its deployment to a super high-altitude area along the Tibetan Plateau.

ENDNOTES

1. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, (London, United Kingdom: London Jona-than Cape, 1935).