

WINDS OF CHANGE – HOW WE TURNED THE TIDE

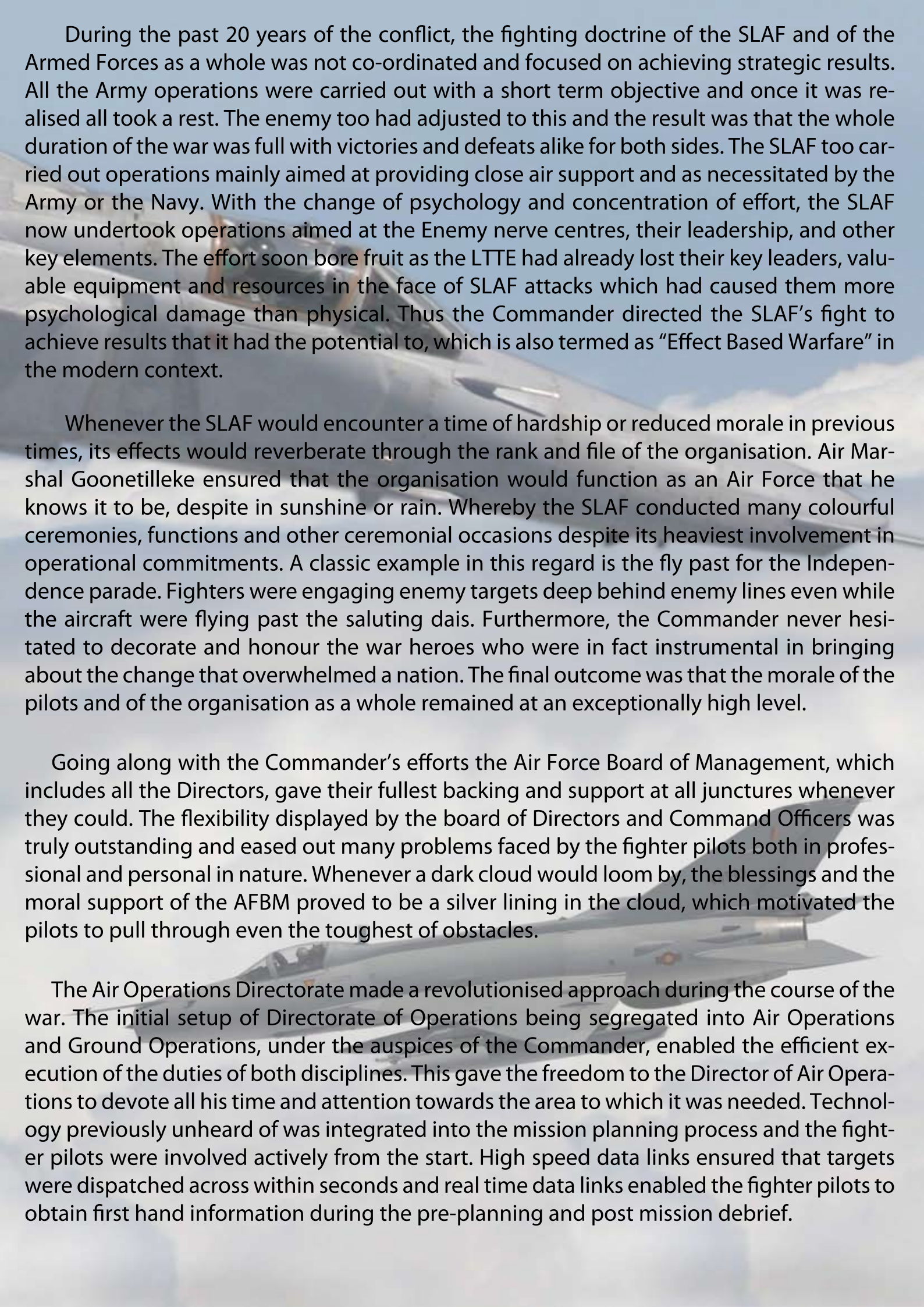
Sri Lanka's dark history dating from 1983 took a new turn of events when the separatist Tamil Tigers closed the anicut at Maavil Aru. The government, having gone through a widely unwelcomed and uneasy peace for approximately 05 years, decided to answer the terrorists actions in the best language understood by the terrorists. The guns of the Army pounded whilst the vessels of the Navy splashed through the Northern waters. It was time for the Air Force Jets to roar into the skies again hunting for terrorists.

Fighter operations were launched in previously unprecedented proportions and results of success were beyond comprehension. Operational doctrines changed and new procedures evolved purely through practice. At this juncture where the fighter pilots can look back at a campaign that is being highly acclaimed the world over, it is pertinent to have a retrospective evaluation at the factors that were instrumental in bringing about this change which could be arguably quoted as the root of success that is being enjoyed by the Sri Lankan military.

As it has been mentioned in many forums before, the vision and the courageous leadership of the President HE Mahinda Rajapakse was the backbone of all the successes. He was bold enough to give the green light for the Armed forces to embark on the warfare that they have been trained on. This is closely followed by the able leadership and guidance extended by the Secretary to the Minister of Defence Lt Col (Retd) Gotabhaya Rajapakse. It was his contribution that turned a distant dream into a realisable dream of the nation. However, on a more personal note there are clearer factors that were behind these waves of successes.

Firstly the Commander of the Air Force, Air Chief Marshal WDRMJ Goonetilleke had a vision to establish a firm foundation of fighter pilots within the Sri Lanka Air Force. Since he took over office as Commander, he has extended his fullest backing and blessings to the fighter pilots of the Sri Lanka Air Force. It is this support that boosted the morale of the fighter pilots and drove them to reach success upon success. He is the only Commander in recent times to have visited the fighter squadrons on a regular basis in order to maintain a close relationship between the premier fighting arms of the organisation. His personal interest into the professional as well as personal aspects of individual pilots is truly praiseworthy.

Air Chief Marshal Goonetilleke defied all odds and braved to breach the system in practice then, whereby seniority was the only cue for selection of people for key appointments. Although this might have been the viable option 50 years ago, when the system came into being, it no longer applies in the modern day's context where talent, capability and innovativeness stand out to challenge seniority alone. Having identified this grave deficiency in the system in practice, he opted to grant the opportunity to the man with the ability than to the man with the age. Although this did send some shockwaves earlier amongst the more traditional circles, it has proven to be effective and has delivered results beyond what was expected.

A fighter jet, likely an F-16, is shown in flight against a blue sky with scattered clouds. Below the jet, a landscape is visible with smoke rising from the ground, suggesting a conflict zone. The jet is angled slightly upwards and to the right.

During the past 20 years of the conflict, the fighting doctrine of the SLAF and of the Armed Forces as a whole was not co-ordinated and focused on achieving strategic results. All the Army operations were carried out with a short term objective and once it was realised all took a rest. The enemy too had adjusted to this and the result was that the whole duration of the war was full with victories and defeats alike for both sides. The SLAF too carried out operations mainly aimed at providing close air support and as necessitated by the Army or the Navy. With the change of psychology and concentration of effort, the SLAF now undertook operations aimed at the Enemy nerve centres, their leadership, and other key elements. The effort soon bore fruit as the LTTE had already lost their key leaders, valuable equipment and resources in the face of SLAF attacks which had caused them more psychological damage than physical. Thus the Commander directed the SLAF's fight to achieve results that it had the potential to, which is also termed as "Effect Based Warfare" in the modern context.

Whenever the SLAF would encounter a time of hardship or reduced morale in previous times, its effects would reverberate through the rank and file of the organisation. Air Marshal Goonetilleke ensured that the organisation would function as an Air Force that he knows it to be, despite in sunshine or rain. Whereby the SLAF conducted many colourful ceremonies, functions and other ceremonial occasions despite its heaviest involvement in operational commitments. A classic example in this regard is the fly past for the Independence parade. Fighters were engaging enemy targets deep behind enemy lines even while the aircraft were flying past the saluting dais. Furthermore, the Commander never hesitated to decorate and honour the war heroes who were in fact instrumental in bringing about the change that overwhelmed a nation. The final outcome was that the morale of the pilots and of the organisation as a whole remained at an exceptionally high level.

Going along with the Commander's efforts the Air Force Board of Management, which includes all the Directors, gave their fullest backing and support at all junctures whenever they could. The flexibility displayed by the board of Directors and Command Officers was truly outstanding and eased out many problems faced by the fighter pilots both in professional and personal in nature. Whenever a dark cloud would loom by, the blessings and the moral support of the AFBM proved to be a silver lining in the cloud, which motivated the pilots to pull through even the toughest of obstacles.

The Air Operations Directorate made a revolutionised approach during the course of the war. The initial setup of Directorate of Operations being segregated into Air Operations and Ground Operations, under the auspices of the Commander, enabled the efficient execution of the duties of both disciplines. This gave the freedom to the Director of Air Operations to devote all his time and attention towards the area to which it was needed. Technology previously unheard of was integrated into the mission planning process and the fighter pilots were involved actively from the start. High speed data links ensured that targets were dispatched across within seconds and real time data links enabled the fighter pilots to obtain first hand information during the pre-planning and post mission debrief.

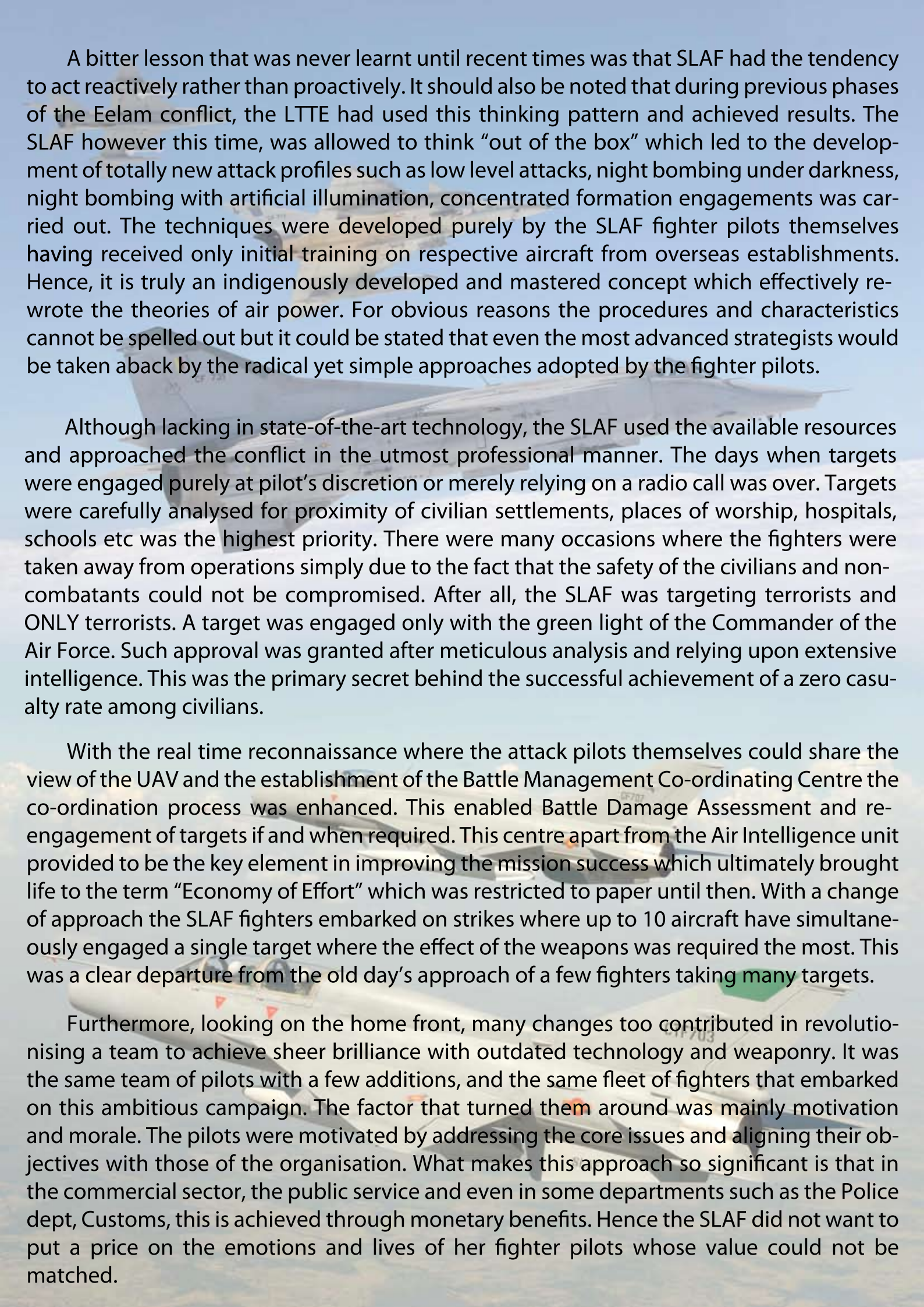
A special word of gratitude is made to the distinguished officers who held the position of Director Air Operations. They took the responsibility of the fighter operations and were never too late to implement corrective measures when deemed them necessary. Fighter operations were streamlined in such a manner that the SLAF now focused on targeting the enemy leadership rather than the supporting cadres and peripheral infrastructure . Through this he gave life to Warden's ring theory, which became a reality when the SLAF successfully wiped out the LTTE's political wing leader SP Tamil Selvan.

Air Vice Marshal HD Abeywickrema, the present Deputy Chief of Staff and the first officer to hold the appointment of Director of Air Operations made a significant contribution in assisting the Commander to implement this revolutionary measures. Knowing the heart and mind of a fighter pilot, he personally involved himself in the on-going operations was instrumental in bringing about several measures which went a long way in making the overall war effort successful. His successor, the present Director Air Operations Air Vice Marshal KA Gunatilleke has continued this effort with enthusiasm and commitment which gave an undisturbed flow to the leadership for fighter operations.

However, the attention was not coned purely on the centre rings but the outer ring targets too were taken as and when required taking the tactical advantage into consideration. Whenever the Army would find it difficult to advance the infrastructure was attacked and when stiff resistance was encountered, the enemy field forces were also attacked. To achieve this, a wide variety of armament was imported from many different nations which enabled the SLAF to meaningfully engage in "weapon to target matching" for the first time in her history of 58 years and during 25 years of war. This included specialised bombs such as runway denial bombs, guided bombs and heat seeking air-to-air missiles.

This ensured economy of effort in comparison to previous attempts where only a limited variety of bombs were used for virtually every type of target that the enemy would present. Today the SLAF fighter fleet is in possession of an unprecedented armament array which could be launched against any type of threat that could emerge. This diversified thinking and tactical approach helped to pave the way for the Army to make unprecedented advances which were beyond anybody's wildest dreams for the past quarter of a century.

In addition to this, the Air Operations Directorate, with the blessings and guidance of the Commander of the Air Force implemented several measures which boosted the confidence of the fighter pilots that motivated them to undertake missions to any corner of the country in day or night. A comprehensive rescue plan was formulated and a co-ordinated effort was implemented whereby Bell 212 helicopters were kept on a high state of alert for a rescue operation. Fortunately, not a single occasion occurred which necessitated the implementation of the rescue operation. Furthermore, new gadgetry such as handheld GPS units, satellite phones, light weight – easy to use – personal pistols specially acquired for fighter pilots etc were provided to pilots on a personal basis. These innovative steps were previously unheard and not thought of. The vision was focused on "Equipping the Man and not Manning the Equipment". A special word of gratitude is deserved by the helicopter pilots and Regimental Special Forces personnel who kept vigil under trying circumstances purely to rescue and save the lives of their counterparts in the fighter stream.

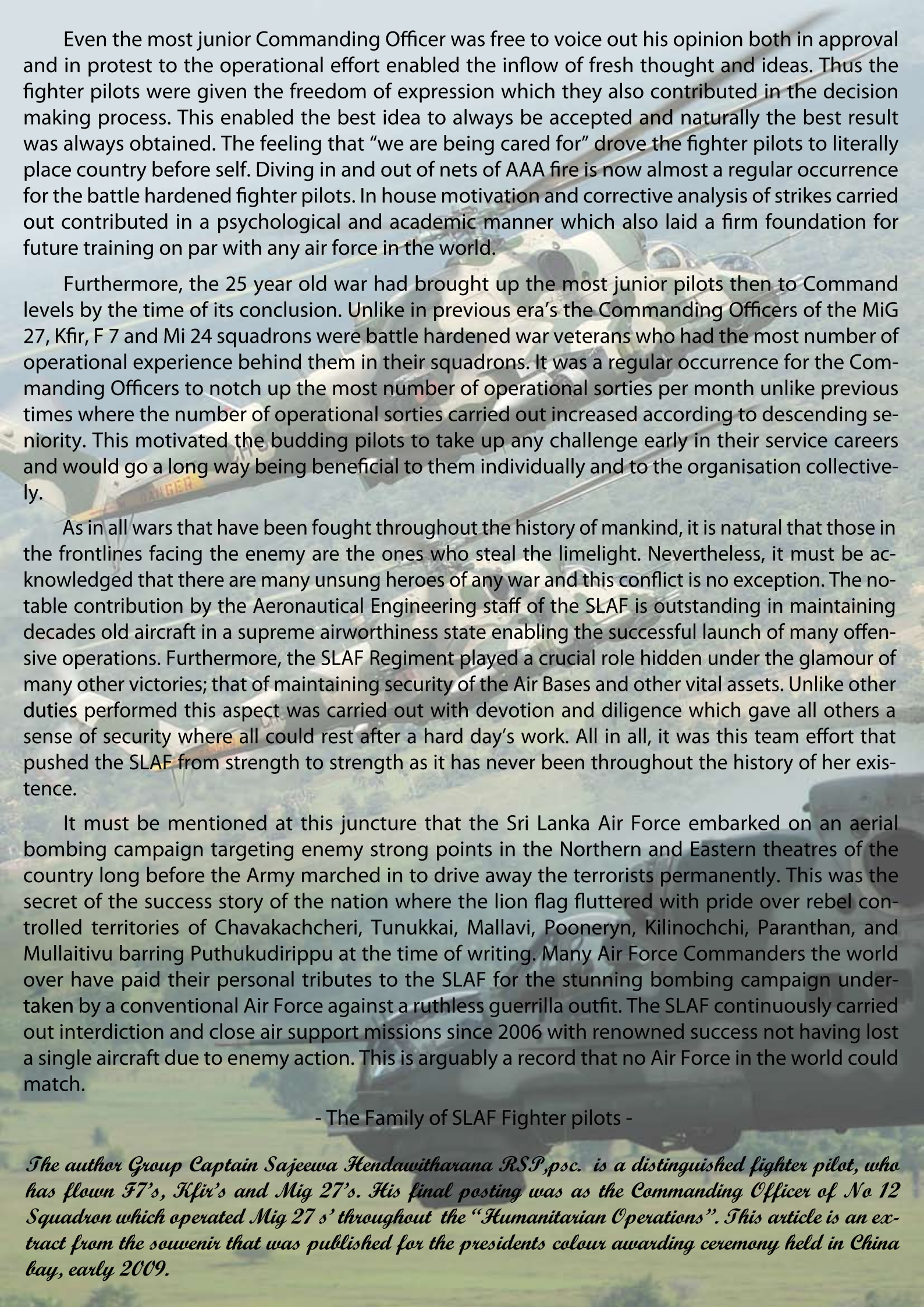


A bitter lesson that was never learnt until recent times was that SLAF had the tendency to act reactively rather than proactively. It should also be noted that during previous phases of the Eelam conflict, the LTTE had used this thinking pattern and achieved results. The SLAF however this time, was allowed to think “out of the box” which led to the development of totally new attack profiles such as low level attacks, night bombing under darkness, night bombing with artificial illumination, concentrated formation engagements was carried out. The techniques were developed purely by the SLAF fighter pilots themselves having received only initial training on respective aircraft from overseas establishments. Hence, it is truly an indigenously developed and mastered concept which effectively re-wrote the theories of air power. For obvious reasons the procedures and characteristics cannot be spelled out but it could be stated that even the most advanced strategists would be taken aback by the radical yet simple approaches adopted by the fighter pilots.

Although lacking in state-of-the-art technology, the SLAF used the available resources and approached the conflict in the utmost professional manner. The days when targets were engaged purely at pilot’s discretion or merely relying on a radio call was over. Targets were carefully analysed for proximity of civilian settlements, places of worship, hospitals, schools etc was the highest priority. There were many occasions where the fighters were taken away from operations simply due to the fact that the safety of the civilians and non-combatants could not be compromised. After all, the SLAF was targeting terrorists and ONLY terrorists. A target was engaged only with the green light of the Commander of the Air Force. Such approval was granted after meticulous analysis and relying upon extensive intelligence. This was the primary secret behind the successful achievement of a zero casualty rate among civilians.

With the real time reconnaissance where the attack pilots themselves could share the view of the UAV and the establishment of the Battle Management Co-ordinating Centre the co-ordination process was enhanced. This enabled Battle Damage Assessment and re-engagement of targets if and when required. This centre apart from the Air Intelligence unit provided to be the key element in improving the mission success which ultimately brought life to the term “Economy of Effort” which was restricted to paper until then. With a change of approach the SLAF fighters embarked on strikes where up to 10 aircraft have simultaneously engaged a single target where the effect of the weapons was required the most. This was a clear departure from the old day’s approach of a few fighters taking many targets.

Furthermore, looking on the home front, many changes too contributed in revolutionising a team to achieve sheer brilliance with outdated technology and weaponry. It was the same team of pilots with a few additions, and the same fleet of fighters that embarked on this ambitious campaign. The factor that turned them around was mainly motivation and morale. The pilots were motivated by addressing the core issues and aligning their objectives with those of the organisation. What makes this approach so significant is that in the commercial sector, the public service and even in some departments such as the Police dept, Customs, this is achieved through monetary benefits. Hence the SLAF did not want to put a price on the emotions and lives of her fighter pilots whose value could not be matched.



Even the most junior Commanding Officer was free to voice out his opinion both in approval and in protest to the operational effort enabled the inflow of fresh thought and ideas. Thus the fighter pilots were given the freedom of expression which they also contributed in the decision making process. This enabled the best idea to always be accepted and naturally the best result was always obtained. The feeling that “we are being cared for” drove the fighter pilots to literally place country before self. Diving in and out of nets of AAA fire is now almost a regular occurrence for the battle hardened fighter pilots. In house motivation and corrective analysis of strikes carried out contributed in a psychological and academic manner which also laid a firm foundation for future training on par with any air force in the world.

Furthermore, the 25 year old war had brought up the most junior pilots then to Command levels by the time of its conclusion. Unlike in previous era’s the Commanding Officers of the MiG 27, Kfir, F 7 and Mi 24 squadrons were battle hardened war veterans who had the most number of operational experience behind them in their squadrons. It was a regular occurrence for the Commanding Officers to notch up the most number of operational sorties per month unlike previous times where the number of operational sorties carried out increased according to descending seniority. This motivated the budding pilots to take up any challenge early in their service careers and would go a long way being beneficial to them individually and to the organisation collectively.

As in all wars that have been fought throughout the history of mankind, it is natural that those in the frontlines facing the enemy are the ones who steal the limelight. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that there are many unsung heroes of any war and this conflict is no exception. The notable contribution by the Aeronautical Engineering staff of the SLAF is outstanding in maintaining decades old aircraft in a supreme airworthiness state enabling the successful launch of many offensive operations. Furthermore, the SLAF Regiment played a crucial role hidden under the glamour of many other victories; that of maintaining security of the Air Bases and other vital assets. Unlike other duties performed this aspect was carried out with devotion and diligence which gave all others a sense of security where all could rest after a hard day’s work. All in all, it was this team effort that pushed the SLAF from strength to strength as it has never been throughout the history of her existence.

It must be mentioned at this juncture that the Sri Lanka Air Force embarked on an aerial bombing campaign targeting enemy strong points in the Northern and Eastern theatres of the country long before the Army marched in to drive away the terrorists permanently. This was the secret of the success story of the nation where the lion flag fluttered with pride over rebel controlled territories of Chavakachcheri, Tunukkai, Mallavi, Pooneryn, Kilinochchi, Paranthan, and Mullaitivu barring Puthukudirippu at the time of writing. Many Air Force Commanders the world over have paid their personal tributes to the SLAF for the stunning bombing campaign undertaken by a conventional Air Force against a ruthless guerrilla outfit. The SLAF continuously carried out interdiction and close air support missions since 2006 with renowned success not having lost a single aircraft due to enemy action. This is arguably a record that no Air Force in the world could match.

- The Family of SLAF Fighter pilots -

The author Group Captain Sajeewa Hendawitharana RSP,psc. is a distinguished fighter pilot, who has flown F7’s, Kfir’s and Mig 27’s. His final posting was as the Commanding Officer of No 12 Squadron which operated Mig 27 s’ throughout the “Humanitarian Operations”. This article is an extract from the souvenir that was published for the presidents colour awarding ceremony held in China bay, early 2009.