

A Thorny Operation*

(Former Navy Chief recounts the Navy's moment of glory)

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It was November 1988 and the Indian Armed Forces were in the midst of Operation Cactus – the military intervention at the request of President Gayoom of the Maldives. After the swift landing of an Indian Army Para Brigade at Hulule Airport the rebel group who were Sri Lankan mercenaries, ran for cover and hijacked a merchant vessel *Progress Light*. Grabbing seven hostages from ashore the rebel ship slipped out of Male harbour but unknown to rebel leader Luthfee a high speed Indian Navy Task Force led by INS Godavari was fast closing-up.

As the drama unfolded at sea, the Navy War Room at South Block got top heavy with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi keenly following the action. Also present and deeply concerned was the Swiss Ambassador to India, since the only lady amongst the seven hostages happened to be his mother-in-law. Capturing the rebel ship was the least of the problems but the safety of the hostages, which included the Swiss Ambassador's mother-in-law, made Operation Cactus a very thorny problem. And so the mission assigned to Captain Gopalachari was of incalculable difficulty – rescue the hostages and capture the rebels.

With the rebels on board *Progress Light* being hell-bent on taking the vessel to Sri Lanka, the Indian Navy War Room received a terse message from the Sri Lankan Navy – 'The SLN had been directed by its Government to destroy the rebel ship if it approached within 100 miles of the Sri Lankan coast'. This was a strange new twist that could seriously endanger the hostages.

The Indian Navy operational staff went into a huddle to re-appreciate the changed situation and, as the Director of Naval

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Operations, I was given the task of convincing my counterpart in the SLN to avoid a needless naval confrontation. Fortunately, the Director of Naval Operations (DNO) of the SLN, Commodore Clancy Fernando was an old friend who had also been my student at the Defence Services Staff College. And so having ensured more sea room for manoeuvre our Task Force Commander on INS Godavari was given an immediate aim, '*Stop Progress Light*'. After a tense hour came the message from Captain Gopalachari on board INS Godavari. 'All hostages rescued safely and rebels captured'.

In the Navy War Room at Delhi there was visible relief and an elated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi strolled across to Navy Chief, Admiral Nadkarni and gave him a pat on the back, adding in good humour, 'Damn good job Admiral but I doubt if the Swiss Ambassador will forgive the Indian Navy for rescuing his mother-in-law'!