

Fly Low, We Are Missing A Missile

(An Experience with IPKF in Sri Lanka)

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Introduction

The IPKF had been in Sri Lanka for a few months when the calamitous mass suicide by LTTE cadres occurred because they were being handed over by the IPKF to the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). There followed a massacre of Lankan civilians and SLA personnel by the LTTE, with attacks on Indian Army units. The fragile Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was coming apart before the ink on the document was dry. Under these conditions I had assumed command of 44 Squadron with IL-76s. The unit had limited experience on the IL-76 since its induction in April 1985. Extensive training of aircrew and technical personnel was still our primary aim, yet the demands of transport support for the rapidly expanding IPKF had to be given priority.

The Jaffna University misadventure on the night of 11 / 12 Oct 1987, where 13 Sikh LI and 10 Para Commandos were severely mauled by the LTTE, as were the MI-8s of 109 HU, changed the complexion of IPKF operations into confrontation with LTTE rather than peacefully disarming them, as hoped for in the Accord. Induction of T-72 tanks continued and they were flown into Jaffna and Trincomallee from Chennai.

The Approach and Landings at Jaffna

When the IAF started operations in 1987 into Palali, the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) air base at Jaffna, the length of the runway was less than 6000 ft, if I recollect correctly. Many IL-76s had already landed at Palali before the induction of T-72s started in Oct 1987. The runway surface was rough with loose gravel making braking

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inefficient. The runway Load Classification Number (LCN), indicating the strength of the surface was unknown, but pretty low. This meant that every landing by an IL-76 would damage the surface, so it was advisable to land at the lowest All Up Weight (AUW). Keeping sufficient fuel for return to Chennai, carrying a T-72 tank with First Line ammunition and a 400 litres barrel of diesel, forced the landing AUW to 145 tons which was 5 tons above permissible limits. But we had to do it, and that is the challenge for air transport operations of swift but assured induction of land forces in an emergency.

So there we were flying tanks into Jaffna and Trincomallee. Those unfamiliar with terrain must know that Trinco has a tall rice mill building on the right hand about a kilometre short of the runway with derricks of ships necessitating a steep final approach. A lagoon surrounds the runway on the East, North and South. At Jaffna the runway is on the west coast and the final approach is over coconut plantations and rice fields. At both places, final approaches are precautionary for short field operations. On one occasion, while we were loading another tank at Meenambakam, I got a message to attend a telephone call from the Air Force Element HQ of IPKF. There were no mobiles around in 1988, so I trudged across to the terminal building. The interaction was amazing, read on.

Can You Make a Very Low Approach?

A brand new CO is always reluctant to refuse a task without consulting Flight Commanders, Navigation / Engineer / Signals / Gunner Leaders, and that is how it should be. In this case I had to decide myself without consultations and refuse a task. Here is, why? The officer at the other end of the phone wanted me to modify the approach procedure for a landing at Jaffna. First he asked me at what distance from the runway (RW), did the IL-76 start its final approach. I explained that it was about 8 to 10 kms from the RW. He then wanted to know at what height the approach started, and I told him that it was about 800 metres Above Ground Level (AGL). What he said was that I should descend down to about 100 to 150 metres AGL, at a distance of some six kms from the RW, keep flying at that height, and then execute a landing off such an approach. Through a window I could see the struggle in progress to load the tank. So I explained that such an approach

was impossible in an IL-76, to which he immediately asked me "Why not, we have all done such things in our days?" So I explained.

The IL -76 would be landing at 145 tons AWW, higher than normal. Unlike other aircraft where Flaps are taken in stages during the final approach, in the IL-76, full landing flaps are lowered at the beginning of the approach, approx 8 to 10 kms from the RW. In this configuration, the engine power is quite high to maintain the desired speed of 245 kms / hr. The landing speed in an IL-76 is AWW plus 100 (145 + 100) thus 245 kms/hr. Rather simple. It would be aeronautically imprudent to fly at 150 metres AGL, 8 kms from the RW at this high AWW. The wheels of the IL-76 are more than 30 feet below the pilot, from the flight deck a pilot cannot see wing tips of the 50 metres wing span, manoeuvring such a giant on final approach is not the easiest of tasks, doing it a 150 metres AGL for 6 to 8 kms would be unwise. The terrain is covered with coconut plantations and rice fields with plenty of bird activity requiring sharp turns to avoid bird hits, which is impossible at the suggested low height. The pilot cannot see the RW at a height of 150 metres AGL and is 8 kms away, how does he align with the RW, and if not aligned, how can he make sharp turns at this height at probably the last minute for what has to be a precautionary short landing? If he is misaligned he will have to overshoot and do it all over again putting the IL-76 and crew through an avoidable hazardous envelope. I ended by saying that as the CO I decide that it would not be done. There was silence at the other end, I then spoke with the Commander, and repeated most of what I had already stated. But finally I had to ask as to why we wanted to do this circus, and added that the IL-76 is not a big Dakota; it was a different class of aircraft.

The reason was equally amusing. It reflects the confusion and uncertainties that reigned supreme throughout the IPKF campaign. It seemed that the LTTE had procured three shoulder fired SAMs, one of which they had fired at a SLAF Marchetti without success. One day earlier IPKF had unearthed another one of the three SAMs, and the *'higher management'* of the IPKF was unsure and extremely worried about the possession and control of the missing third SAM. They felt it could be used against IAF transport aircraft landing at Jaffna; hence, this unconventional approach and landing into Jaffna. How about it, I was asked, after

getting this fresh input. I reiterated that nothing in the configuration and manoeuvrability of the IL-76 had changed; missile or no missile, the IL-76 could not make this type of an approach anywhere in the world, especially without any land based electronic guidance to keep it aligned with the RW. Besides, other factors precluded attempting such an approach, it was unsafe and unsound, and that as CO I could not permit this procedure.

Before signing off, I asked the Commander that since the 'third SAM' was presumably with the LTTE, should I abandon flying into Jaffna because of imminent danger to the IL-76? Dear readers, the answer I got was, "We haven't asked you to stop flying".

Conclusion

Normally, as is expected, I should have shared briefing inputs with the crew and concerned personnel of the Squadron. In this case I remained silent, flew another tank into Jaffna, and returned to Agra. Months later after many IL-76s and AN-32s had been in and out of Jaffna, I told the story to the aircrew during routine briefing. Never heard of the third SAM. Does anyone know?

Tanks with the Indian Peace Keeping Force: I Want My Jeep for Reconnaissance

Introduction

While the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) moved into Sri Lanka in June 1987, the real troubles started in October 1987 when LTTE cadres in Indian custody were to be handed over to Sri Lanka and they committed suicide. That act created a conflagration and the rest is history.

Under these conditions, I assumed the command of 44 Squadron with IL-76s in October 1987 to be as they say 'baptised under fire'. The massive airlift commenced within days of my becoming Commanding Officer (CO) with giant IL-76s flying into Jaffna and Trincomalee from Gwalior, Jaisalmer, Hyderabad and Chennai. New Delhi was abuzz with plans and one decision was to induct T-72 tanks into Jaffna. Our exposure in loading / offloading

this metal monster into the IL-76 was very poor. We had received no training on this aspect in the USSR. A little background narration of the difficulties would be worthwhile.

Marrying the T-72 with the IL-76

Getting the Monster In and Out. The tank weighs 43 tons with First Line ammunition, topped-up fuel, 400 litre diesel barrels strapped on and crew. This is the maximum cargo that the IL-76 can carry, nothing more. The tank cannot drive into the aircraft like a BMP/BRDM. The 'tension' of both tracks has to be equal, so that when they are engaged to the drive from the engine, the tank does not give a jerk to one side. And would the reader believe, that the tension is calibrated by a plumb line, even today. To load, the T-72 drives onto the ramp and stops; it is then winched inside for about 15 feet into the cargo compartment. Then the tank's engine starts, tracks are engaged and the tank moves forward under its own power to the Centre of Gravity in the middle of the compartment. For off-loading the reverse process is followed. It is a hair raising exercise where providence and skill of the driver share equal credit. It is pertinent to add that the space between the tracks and the hot air pipes running along the cargo floor is just about four inches. Anyone who has not witnessed this operation cannot imagine the heart-stopping moments, specially when during the winching in and out, the T-72 stops at 45 degrees angle at the loading sill between the horizontal floor and the tilted ramp and swings up and down like a pendulum, frighteningly close to the hydraulic jacks that operate the cargo doors. Steadying the tank by hands is not an option.

How Long Does It Take? We practiced as much as we could at Agra. The Sappers from the Parachute Brigade led by their Officer Commanding (OC) then Major Babbaya, used the classic hit and trial method till a workable solution was found. Much depended on Havaladar Gurbachan Singh the driver and Subedar Pillai from EME who equalled the tension on both tracks, with the plumb line. If the tension is unequal, when the tracks are engaged to move forward / rearward inside the IL-76, the tank skews left/ right, now to get it straight again is very difficult with just 4 to 6 inches between the steel tracks and hot air pipes running along the floor. Any such jerk could pierce the pipes. Sometimes, it took three hours to load / unload the metal monster, and was a frustrating

and tormenting process. After many trials we were ready, with the tank parked on thick railway sleepers to obviate damage to the aircraft floor.

At Meenambakam Airport and Into Jaffna

Immediate Engagement. So one morning we were loading a T-72 at Chennai airport with the whole exercise in full view of the public. With the tank secured, it was time to go; when the Squadron Commander, Major Kaul, asked that his jeep be also loaded since he wanted it for reconnaissance immediately after getting down from the aircraft. I explained to him that with the T-72 inside we could not carry even an empty tin of condensed milk. He was unconvinced, and pointing at the vacant ramp wanted to know why we were refusing to load his jeep. After some more discussions, and Kaul's insistence, I gave up and told him that I was starting the aircraft engines and heading for Jaffna – as I had another task to do later. I added that if he wished to hop a lift he was welcome but I was going – Kaul then came along. The offloading of tank at Jaffna was mercifully quick, and the tank joined the IPKF battle. Later, I learnt that it was immediately tasked to head towards Jaffna University; where earlier, there had been an engagement between Indian helicopter borne troops and the LTTE. Readers, will recall it was 13 SIKH LI which suffered very heavy casualties in that operation. Kaul went on a reconnaissance in that very T-72.

A Strange Take-Off. The induction of troops and materiel continued for many days and slowly the IPKF built-up into a massive force. More tanks were ferried into Jaffna and Trincomalee. On one such occasion I landed in Jaffna at about 1600 hrs with a tank in Dec 1987; and would you believe it, we got the monster out after 1930 hrs, it was pitch dark – night halt at Jaffna was prohibited for IL-76. The runway had no lights at all, I had to get off the ground with the shortest take-off run. We dropped our flaps and slats to fully extended position, and rolled; the empty IL-76 surged skyward very fast but in a very awkward nose down attitude but climbing fast. Pilots will appreciate the strange feeling I had. It was pitch dark over the Indian Ocean, all take-offs being Eastwards.

I Meet Major Kaul again at Pune Military Hospital

A few years later, I happened to be at Military Hospital, Pune and

bumped into Major Kaul. He was then minus a couple of fingers and an eye but looking fit and proud. He told me about the fateful day when he had left our IL-76 for Jaffna University on a reconnaissance. When he was standing-up in his tank, to get a good idea of what his tanks would have to contend with, the LTTE had fired a rocket propelled grenade (RPG). As usual, providence had stepped-in. The RPG had hit the tank hull, bounced and appeared to go upwards and exploded; the blast took away a few of Kaul's fingers and damaged one eye, which he lost finally.

It was a chance meeting and, after a few pleasantries, I recalled our discussion at Meenambakam airport about not loading his jeep in the IL-76. Indeed the absence of a jeep at Jaffna had forced Kaul to do his reconnaissance in the T-72 tank, and that in all probability ensured that the LTTE got nothing more of him than 'a few fingers and only one eye'.

Doing it right, appearing to be stodgy and sticking to the rules; even when they can be bent, does pay rich dividends and saves lives. I could very well have taken the jeep, and surely Kaul would have done his 'reconnaissance' in that jeep and the LTTE would have attacked him with an RPG. In that case, would I have had the pleasure of meeting him again in Pune?