The Role of Indian Naval Seaward Defence Boat T-56 in Operation *Pawan* (02-03 November 1987 C.E.)

Ms. Neha Hemant Mhatre

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar Varde College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to the University of Mumbai, Mumbai

Abstract

Operation Pawan (1987–1990), a tri-service operation by the Indian Armed Forces, marked India's significant involvement during the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. While ground operations have been extensively documented, the role of the Indian Navy remains under-explored. This paper focuses on an operation undertaken by the Indian Naval Seaward Defence Boat (SDB) T-56's mission on 02nd and 03rd November 1987, emphasising on its tactical ingenuity and resilience under hostile conditions. Tasked initially with transporting personnel, SDB T-56 found itself navigating volatile waters under enemy fire and safeguarding ground forces during an intense confrontation, showcasing adaptability, and the importance of military decision-making in real-time conflict scenarios. The study highlights challenges of the mission such as intelligence gaps, inter-service coordination issues, and operational constraints. The crew's effective use of value-focused thinking and planned heuristics under duress ensured the successful evacuation of personnel without casualties. The application of manoeuvre warfare and mission command principles enabled the SDB T-56 to adapt swiftly and achieve tactical objectives in an asymmetric warfare environment. Drawing on archival records, operational reports, and first-hand accounts, this paper explores SDB T-56's actions for broader implications in military strategy and decision-making in conflict zones, offering insights into the critical role of maritime forces in addressing humanitarian and security challenges.

Keywords: operation pawan, indian navy, SDB T-56, sri lankan ethnic conflict, LTTE, naval operations, maritime security

Brief Historical Background to the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict

The ethnic conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government stands as one of the longest and devastating in contemporary history. Following Ceylon's 1 independence, the government's discriminatory policies led Tamil groups to demand for regional autonomy, a request that was rejected by central authorities who feared it would threaten national unity. This rejection intensified tensions and resulted in the rise of violent secessionist movements and armed groups. While India initially regarded the situation as an internal matter for Sri Lanka, its stance changed after the 1983 riots, driven by domestic pressures from Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran, a significant influx of refugees to India's southern shores, and concerns over Sri Lanka's military ties with foreign powers such as the US, UK, Pakistan, and Israel.2 Separated by just 14.4 nautical miles, India feared that a conflict-ridden Sri Lanka could disrupt the peace it enjoyed in the Indian Ocean region. Additionally, the geographical proximity and shared linguistic and ethnic ties between Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamil Nadu heightened concerns about the conflict spilling into Indian territory. India then adopted a dual approach: diplomatically brokering peace while training Tamil militants through R&AW.3

By 1987, the conflict escalated significantly, and Colombo launched a large-scale military offensive.

Concerned about the potential backlash in Tamil Nadu and the risk of further escalating the crisis, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene on 29 July 1987, signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, formalising India's role in the conflict, reflecting its broader strategy to stabilise the region, safeguard Tamil interests, and curb external influences threatening its strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean.

The initial mandate of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord aimed to prevent forces hostile to India's interests from establishing a foothold in Sri Lanka. The accord sought to reposition the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE to their pre-1987 positions and enforce a ceasefire within 24 hours of its signing. A critical aspect of this mandate was the requirement for the LTTE to surrender their weapons within 72 hours.4 Operation Pawan emerged as an important phase within India's mediatory role in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

Literature Review

The monograph by Scudieri, Major James D. (1994). The Indian Peace-Keeping Force in Sri Lanka, 1987-90: A Case Study in Operations Other Than War, provides a comprehensive background on the ethnic and religious turmoil that has plagued Sri Lanka for decades. It discusses India's geopolitical ambitions as a regional power, which prompted the ratification of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord on 29th July 1987, granting the IPKF its mandate. The text meticulously examines the IPKF's transition through three distinct phases - peacekeeping, an assault on an urban guerrilla stronghold, and a prolonged rural insurgency. While the monograph offers valuable insights, including lessons applicable to other nations' operations outside traditional war contexts, it notably omits any discussion of the naval dimension of the operation.

Sudipta Das's recent work, Revisiting IPKF to Draw Lessons for India's Future Out-of-Area Operations (2023), highlights the vulnerabilities of the IPKF, particularly the gaps in intelligence, and discusses critical lessons for India's future out-of-area operations. While offering an Indian perspective on operational shortcomings, like Scudieri's work,

Das's analysis remains focused on operations other than naval, leaving the Navy's contributions largely overlooked.

The IPKF Experience in Sri Lanka (1994) an article by Chari, Dr PR, in the Research of the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security, University of Illinois, is a critical analysis of the military strategies employed by the IPKF and the lessons learned from the engagement. The article also evaluates the broader implications of the mission on India's national security framework. Dr Chari's analysis also excludes any substantive discussion of the Indian Navy's role.

The existing body of work on Operation Pawan offers significant insights into the political, strategic, and military aspects of the intervention, but the Indian Navy's involvement during Op Pawan remains an unexplored dimension.

Methodology

The idea to carry out this research developed on the basis of the inability to place the Indian Navy during Operation Pawan, despite it being one of the major forces that happen to connect India and Sri Lanka. This is an exploratory research based on seventeen semi-structured interviews of veterans who were a part of Op Pawan and India's principal defence advisor. These interviews provided invaluable first-hand accounts of ground realities in Sri Lanka and India from 1987 to 1990. It was particularly remarkable that, even after 37 years, the veterans recalled their experiences with extraordinary clarity, almost as if the events had taken place yesterday. (However, it should also be noted that representations may be coloured by biases).

In addition to interviews, classified and unpublished naval reports obtained from the History Division, Ministry of Defence India (from August to October 2024) were analysed. Access to these documents was pivotal in understanding the operational strategies, challenges, and contributions of the Navy during the mission.

Given the classified nature of the subject, some interviewees chose to remain anonymous, which has been respected in this study.

Operation Pawan

Operation Pawan (1987 to 1990) was a tri-service operation by the Indian Armed Forces to establish stability, security, and peace in Sri Lanka. It started with the induction of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) on 30 July 1987.5 India deployed the IPKF to enforce the accord's terms at the request of President Jayawardane. Its initial objective was to supervise the surrender of arms by the militants. Gen Depinder Singh was appointed as the overall force commander.

What was originally conceived as a peace-keeping initiative, based on the expectation that the LTTE would surrender their arms and the Sri Lankan forces would adhere to the ceasefire, ultimately failed to materialise. The evolving mandate further complicated the mission. Initially deployed as peacekeepers, the IPKF quickly found themselves in direct combat with the LTTE, creating both operational and political challenges. As a result, the operations rapidly transformed into peace-enforcement and eventually escalated into full-scale conflict.6 The Indian Armed Forces were exposed to prolonged engagements with the LTTE, the unfamiliar territories, the political instabilities, national security and humanitarian missions.

Amidst this complex and volatile environment, the Indian Navy played a crucial role in ensuring maritime security. During Operation Pawan, the Indian Navy undertook a range of combat, patrol, and logistical operations. New naval detachments and air stations were established, while existing air stations saw their runways extended and reinforced to support operations.7 Naval reconnaissance efforts covered vast areas, and the wear and tear on naval ships exceeded standard limits by 50%.8

In November 1987, the Indian Naval Seaward Defence Boat SDB T-56 9 positioned at the Kankesanturai (KKS) naval base in Jaffna, was ordered to patrol the Palk Bay, curb illicit movements, and provide critical support along the Sri Lankan coastline.10 On 02 and 03 November 1987, tasked with transporting para commandos for a decisive confrontation with LTTE militants at Moolai beach, North Western Jaffna, SDB T-56 found itself in a dire situation.11 The crew faced a difficult decision - obey orders or defy them to assist comrades under heavy fire. SDB T-56's swift decisive actions were crucial to the safety of over 100 commandos engaged with the LTTE.

Timeline and Tactical Acumen of The Indian Naval Seaward Defence Boat T-56 Operation on 02 and 03 November 1987

1. Operational Details

On the night of 02 November 1987 at 20.00hrs, during routine patrolling, the Commanding Officer of SDB T-56 received orders to return to base and was briefed on a joint mission with the Indian Army and Air Force.12 The objective was to transport around a hundred odd para commandos to Moolai beach on the North Western Jaffna coast, a suspected LTTE hideout, which was about 20 nautical miles from Kankesanturai. The execution demanded navigating through uncharted waters while ensuring stealth during the night's darkness.13 The designated mission for the para commandos involved advancing towards a suspected hideout believed to harbour LTTE cadres and apprehending the members of the LTTE.14 The para commandos' deployment was orchestrated to occur through Gemini vessels15 for landing operations on the designated beachfront.

During the early hours of 03 November 1987, intelligence reports highlighted the movement of aircrafts - Jaguars16 , MiGs17 , and Mi-25s18 dispatched from Bangalore to execute an air offensive that would help softening the target. Their primary objective was to weaken the targeted area, facilitating the advancement of para commandos. Approaching Moolai beach within a 400-metre proximity, SDB T-56 strategically positioned itself for the disembarkation of para commandos via Geminis, each capable of ferrying a maximum of ten soldiers.19

At daybreak, the Indian Air Force executed their strategic manoeuvre, where Number 125 Squadron initiated the offensive. Two Mi-25s flown by Sqn Ldr Rajbir Singh and Flt Lt Atanu Guru targeted militant strongholds, effectively neutralising two LTTE boats in the initial phase.20 21 However, this tactical strike elicited heavy militant gunfire, compromising the stealth of SDB T-56. The vessel became a target of LTTE fire, compelling a defensive response involving the release of approximately

hundred shells from the vessel's naval guns to shield itself.22 This retaliatory action successfully halted the hostile firing directed at the ship. By 15.00 hrs on 03 November 1987, a distress call from the para-commandos' commanding officer indicated depleted ammunition and ongoing pursuit by LTTE forces, disrupting the planned evacuation assisted by RT guns and tanks.23 Faced with this parlous situation, the para commandos sought refuge back at the beach, urgently requiring evacuation by the Geminis, despite the imminent danger posed by pursuing LTTE cadres.

In response to the exigency, the CO of SDB T-56 devised a meticulous rescue plan. Utilising tracer shells fired at maximum range, a protective shield was established to ensure the safe extraction of ground forces back to the vessel.24 This strategic deployment effectively deterred the advancing LTTE forces, compelling their withdrawal and thwarting any further movement towards the beach. Subsequently, SDB T-56 escalated its offensive capabilities, discharging an estimated four hundred to five hundred shells, fortifying the protective shield and facilitating a secure passage for six to eight Gemini vessels to retrieve the imperilled para commandos.25

Upon the successful embarkation of all personnel, SDB T-56 swiftly disengaged and navigated back towards Kankesanturai at maximum speed. Notably, the mission concluded without any casualties.

2. Analysis of the Operation

The SDB T-56 operation highlights the confluence of strategic planning, adaptive decision-making, and operational agility.

The initial briefing to the Commanding Officer, outlining the task of transporting para commandos under the cover of darkness to a hostile beach, laid the groundwork for a meticulously planned operation.26 However, the dynamicity of conflict necessitated rapid adjustments and real-time decision-making, accentuating the significance of value-focused thinking. Amidst escalating hostilities and depleted ammunition of the advancing para commandos, the CO of SDB T-56 was confronted with a high-priority decision demanding swift action. The deployment of tracer shells at maximum range,

strategically designed to create a protective cover for the withdrawing troops, epitomises the strategic application of firepower in the face of adversity. This tactical manoeuvre not only shielded the ground forces but also facilitated their safe evacuation, thus exemplifying the effectiveness of planned heuristics 27 in dynamic conflict scenarios.

The operational art observed in this scenario manifests as a combination of manoeuvre warfare and mission command.28 29 Manoeuvre warfare is evident through the strategic navigation of SDB T-56 in hostile and uncharted waters, adapting to dynamic situations while ensuring the achievement of tactical objectives. Mission command is exemplified by the decentralised decision-making process, where the commanding officer of SDB T-56 devised and executed a rescue plan without direct orders, emphasising initiative and improvisation to address compelling challenges as they arose.

The response from SDB T-56's naval guns, firing an extensive barrage of shells to construct a protective umbrella, highlights the adaptability and rapid decision-making capabilities of the crew amidst a fluid and high-stakes environment. This orchestrated use of firepower, in conjunction with the timely arrival of evacuation vessels, resulted in a successful extraction with zero casualties.

3. Operational Glitches

The SDB T-56 operation also stresses on the severe operational glitches that bring to light the unpredictable and challenging nature of joint military operations in hostile environments.

One of the foremost issues was the lack of accurate and real-time intelligence in 1987.30 While the mission aimed to target LTTE leaders and cadres at Moolai beach, the lack of precise information about the enemy's strength and positioning increased the risk factor. The heavy militant gunfire faced by the advancing forces suggested that LTTE's presence was more fortified than anticipated, compromising the mission's element of surprise. This lapse in intelligence coordination placed both the para commandos and naval assets at heightened risk.

The mission's coordination across branches of the Armed Forces - Army, Navy, and Air Force - exposed gaps in inter-service communication.

A particularly dangerous moment arose when the para commandos, initially tasked with advancing towards suspected LTTE hideouts, reported depleted ammunition and were forced to retreat. The disruption of the planned evacuation due to RT guns and tank movements created a precarious situation, leaving the soldiers stranded under enemy pursuit. The evacuation response, although eventually successful, revealed vulnerabilities in contingency planning, inter-service communication and the need for more robust logistical support. As noted by Manoharan, N. (2009) 'The IPKF operations suffered from poor inter-services coordination, as narrow service interests and hierarchical barriers hindered decision-making, with any existing collaboration relying on personal rapport among commanders rather than institutional mechanisms. To address this, a unified command system under a Chief of Defence Staff is essential, along with the establishment of joint services institutions, such as an Armed Forces College, to foster integration and a unified mindset across the services.'31

Lastly, a key aspect of the mission was maintaining stealth while approaching Moolai beach. However, heavy militant gunfire following the initial air offensive by Mi-25 helicopters compromised this element. The use of Geminis for evacuation was another area of concern. Perhaps effective for stealth landings, the vessels' limited capacity of ten personnel per trip prolonged the troops' exposure to enemy fire. Despite the commanding officer's ingenious use of tracer shells to create a protective shield, the limitations of the evacuation vessels was highlighted, emphasising the need for faster and better-equipped alternatives in high-intensity combat missions.

Conclusion

The SDB T-56 mission not only serves as a historical milestone but also offers insights into the application of value-focused32 decision-making, strategic thinking and heuristics in navigating complex conflict scenarios. The operation at Moolai beach demonstrated the Indian Navy's adaptability in high-pressure situations but also revealed areas for improvement. Enhanced reconnaissance, better logistical foresight, accurate intel gathering and a more integrated approach to multi-branch coordination could have mitigated the operational glitches. Despite these challenges, the operation concluded with zero casualties, highlighting the tactical expertise. These lessons remain of the utmost importance for future joint missions in similarly challenging environments.

Figure 1 Indian Naval Seaward Defence Boat T-56

Figure 2 Area of operations in India and Sri Lanka
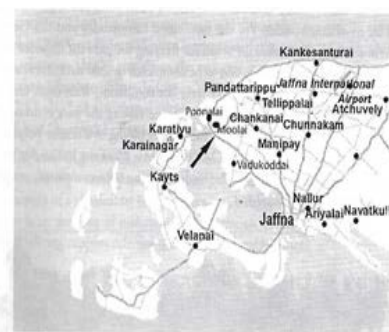
Area of operations in Moolai, off coast of Western Jaffna.

Figure 3 Area of operations in Moolai

Figure 4 The crew with Indian Army
Figures: Images and Maps

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