

NEIGHBOURS

IPKF

Valuable War Lessons

THE image is a bit incongruous. Unlike the usual starched soldier standing stiffly to attention, this sentry outside Lt-General Amar Singh Kalkat's headquarters is on the prowl, alert, his finger ever on the trigger. But the trigger is not of the usual Indian Army issue, the 7.62 Ishapore Self Loading Rifle (SLR). The curved magazine, the short barrel, the foldable butt: the ubiquitous Kalashnikov silhouette. The sentry himself, as his red beret and flashes indicate, is a paracommando.

The first IPKF unit to suffer casualties in September 1987, the paracommandos have been the first to learn. "It took just two bash-ups to show the major problem. Our rifle was lousy, too big, packing too much range and too slow a rate of fire for close combat," says an officer.

Subsequently, the commandos started using Kalashnikovs captured from the LTTE. The army has ordered a sizeable number of rifles in the Kalashnikov genre. It has given up its earlier insistence on not giving the Ishapore SLR burst-fire capability. The aim had been to conserve ammunition. But in close quarter battles, the Indian jawan found his one-shot-at-a-time SLR hopelessly inadequate. "Here we need to bring in an effective volume of fire," says Major-General R.N. Bhalla, commanding the 54 Infantry Division at Palaly near Jaffna. So planners have now allowed a burst-fire position on a certain percentage of SLRs. "The rethinking on small arms is the first fallout of the Sri Lankan adventure," says a senior general.

Two years of low-intensity conflict has changed much else. Many lessons have been learnt, many new theories tested, many demolished. The results are already visible. Others are being debated and stored on paper and videotape and punched into the army's vast institutional memorybank. "Sri Lanka will make a long-term difference to our army," says Lt-General Kalkat, the affable, bespectacled soldier who was himself baptised in Chhamb in 1971.

A team of experts from the College of Combat at Mhow has been recreating the major IPKF battles on videofilm. Where actual footage is not available, battles are being simulated either on the ground or on computers. "We are re-

writing our infantry combat manuals," says an expert from Mhow.

The Indian Army, despite its three decades of counter-insurgency experience, had many lessons brought home to it. The foremost: that the modern soldier needs to be motivated to fight in a foreign land. Says a general: "Today's jawan is literate, he listens to the BBC and asks questions. You have to tell him what he is doing here, something we did not do earlier on and paid the price." So, soldiers had existentialist doubts or tepid to treat the Sri Lanka operations like any other war, liberally using firepower and destroying houses as if they were operating in enemy territory. Says Major-General Ashok Mehta, commander of the 54 Mountain Division based in Batticaloa: "We had to learn to fight in a situation where your adversary need not be your enemy."

The army, incidentally, realised too late that the old convention of shipping home the ashes and not the bodies of jawans from the lower ranks (officers' bodies are sent back) was hopelessly outdated today when jawans and their families are more demanding.

Sri Lanka also underlined the inadequacy of a conventional force in an unusual situation. Two major operations recently undertaken by the 54 Mountain Division deserve mention. To the south and south-west of Batticaloa lie large expanses of impenetrable jungles where the LTTE has several major camps. By snooping electronically on the LTTE's radio communications, broad locations of two camps were identified. Mawila near Verugal river and Topimalai in the thick Kanjikudiaru jungles.

Mawila was assigned to the 1/11 Gurkhas in Operation Kiranti and 4 Bihar was to seek out Topimalai (Operation Angelfire). While the Gurkhas took four days of hard trekking through tropical forest to approach their target, the Biharis had to literally sniff their way out. After wandering around clueless, an adivasi jawan caught the scent of human excreta and, following it, the raiding party climbed a hillock where the camp was perched. But a company of infantrymen climbing through shrubbery makes a lot of racket. So, by the time the Biharis got there the Tigers had vanished leaving behind maps, wireless

"We have had great battle training. Our boys are no longer afraid of the bullet."

MAJOR-GENERAL
R.N. BHALLA



"In Sri Lanka, we had to learn to fight in a situation where your adversary need not be your enemy."

MAJOR-GENERAL
ASHOK MEHTA

