

## **Malays in the military service of Kandyan kings - by M.D. (Tony) Saldin**

Referred to as 'JaMinissu' by the Sinhalese, 'JaManussar' by the Tamils, 'MalaiKarar' by the Moors, and 'Orang Melayu' and 'Orang Java' by the Malays themselves, The Sri Lanka Malays are a potpourri descending from Javanese, Madurese, Sunnapers, Bandanese, Buginese, Amboinese, Macassarese, Sumatrans, Balinese, Moulacans, and people from Penang, Kedah, Johor, Melaka, Singapore and other islands in the eastern archipelago. The present day Sri Lanka Malay community numbering around 60,000 are descendants of nobility, political exiles, soldiers, adventurers, and mercenaries from the time of Dutch and subsequent British rule in Sri Lanka.

While the role played by the Malays who served the Malay Corps of the Dutch army in Ceylon and the subsequent 1<sup>st</sup> Ceylon Regiment of the British Army and its successor, the Ceylon Rifle Rebythegiment (CRR), is well known, little is said about the role played by the Malays who were in the service of the Kandyan monarchs.

Who were these Malays who were in the Kandyan kings' service? Records indicate that during the Dutch-Kandyan war of 1765/66, the remnants of the Dutch army, commanded by Governor Baron Van Eck, were left behind in the hill capital and these men probably joined the service of the Kandyan monarch. Others were former soldiers of the Dutch Malay Corps who deserted to the Kandyans, since they did not want to join the British after the Maritime Provinces were surrendered by the Dutch in 1796. There were also those Malay soldiers who had taken loans from their officers and being unable to pay back, melted away into the countryside and later joined the Kandyan king who was always on the lookout for trained soldiers for his army.

According to Hussainmiya writing in 1990, the Kandyan kings employed Malay soldiers for the defence of the interior, as well as palace guards, for immigration duties and for guarding the "Kadawatha" or passes into the Kandyan kingdom. Their importance grew when the Nayakkar King Sri WickremaRajasinghe (1798-1815) looked for foreigners with no local blood ties to serve as bodyguards to protect him from scheming Kandyan nobility. These Malay soldiers were paid in cash or their services, while their counterparts received grants of land for their sustenance.

The inner circle of the King's bodyguards were Malays, Malabarais and Caffres (Africans of Mozambique origin). The 'Appuhamis', a cadet corp of the sons of local nobility formed a further ring around the king. According to Ralph Peiris writing in 1956, this stipendary class of Malay soldiers (Sinhalese – PadikaraPeruwa) was instituted during the reign of the Nayakkar king Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1782). It then consisted of four companies. His successor RajadhiRajasinghe (1782-1798) increased it to seven companies which was later increased to fifty. The last king Sri WickremaRajasinghe raised its strength to twenty two companies with 32 men

each. The Kandyan Malays normally resided in the Katukelle area which was one of the southern Kadawatha or entry points into the city. They were armed with muskets of European make and wore their poisoned daggers, or Kreese, at their sides at all times.

The king also appointed Malays as 'Java Muhamdirams' or chief military officials to his court. AssanaKapitan and Chief Kuppen were some of them.

A famous Kandyan Malay chief was Prince Sangunglo (also referred to as 'Sankelan' by Prof. Paul E. Peiris), captain of the Kandyan kings' mercenaries, who led the Kandyan attack on the British garrison in Kandy on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1803.

In the subsequent close quarter combat with the British, Sangunglo stabbed Quartermaster Brown with his kreese, but in the melee he was bayoneted by Ensign Barry and the death blow was delivered by Major Davie with his sword. The first attack was repulsed but the Kandyans regrouped and kept up a harrying fire at British positions. After a short resistance, Major Davie raised the white flag and negotiated terms with AdigarPilimataluvava for a withdrawal. Incidentally, Sangunglo's half brothers, Captain NoordeenGowa and CapatainKaraengSapinine, both of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ceylon Regiment, who were captured by the Kandyans, were executed by King Sri WickremaRajasinghe for their refusal to sever their allegiance to the British. Even though brothers, they were on opposite camps with their loyalties to their respective masters. Their grandfather was BataraGowaAmasMadina II, the rebellious ex-King of Gowa exiled to Ceylon by the Dutch in 1767.

Another well-known ex-soldier was Drum Major O'Deane, a Malay non-commissioned officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ceylon Regiment who deserted to the Kandyans in the war of 1803. He was absorbed into the service of King Sri WickramaRajasinghe and provided with a Singhalese girl as his wife. For over ten years he lived there contentedly and had three children. But the happy days were to end soon. The British invaded Kandy again, and this time they had the backing of several Kandyan chiefs. When the kingdom was captured by the British in 1815, O'Deane and his family were among those captured. He was arrested for his act of treason by deserting to the enemy, summarily court-martialled and then sentenced to be shot. However, O'Deane had much information on his former Commanding Officer Major Davie, whilst he was a captive of the Kandyan monarch. In addition, Governor Robert Brownrigg was impressed with the 'uniform good conduct' of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ceylon (Malay) Regiment. Taking these factors as mitigation, O'Deane's sentence was subsequently commuted to "transportation to the Penal settlement of New South Wales in Australia". And so, O'Deane and family sailed away from Ceylon in January 1816 on board the "*HMS Kangaroo*". A chapter in his life ended and a new one began.

O'Deane was subsequently appointed as a watchman, then constable of the government domain and as Malay interpreter for the Australian Government until his retirement. He was stationed at Fort Wellington, Raffles Bay, in the Northern Territories and acted as interpreter with Indonesian (Macasseresse) fishermen who used the Australian coast to dry their harvest of sea cucumber. O'Deane died on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1860, after being resident for 44 years in Australia.

With the takeover of entire Ceylon by the British in 1815, the destiny of the Sri Lankan Malay community was sealed: to provide a regular source of military manpower to the Ceylon Rifle Regiment (CRR) which was the backbone of the military establishment in Ceylon, until its disbandment in 1873.

All the Kandyan Malays too became subjects of Great Britain in the end, and the former mercenaries were gradually absorbed into the regular force of the CRR.

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References:

- 1) Orang Rejimen – The Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment, B.A. Hussainmiya
- 2) The Kandyan Wars – The British Army in Ceylon, 1803 to 1818, Colonel Geoffrey Powell
- 3) Tri-Sinhala – Paul E. Peiris
- 4) The First Ceylonese Family in Australia – Glennys Ferguson in the “Ceylankan” February 2002 issue published by the Ceylon Society of Australia. (The writer also has had personal communication with O'Deane's great-great-great-grand-daughter, Glennys Ferguson, who lives in Sydney and who traced her ancestry to Sri Lanka).

(The writer is a past president of the Mabile Malay Association and a former vice president of the Sri Lanka-Indonesia Friendship Association – SLIFA).