

Mrs. Willy is back at Coral Cove Beach

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Lieutenant (MCD) Shanthi Kumar Bahar receiving President's Cup for Practical Pistol Firing from the then First Lady Elna Jayawardena in 1966



On the full moon Poya day of 1st May 2007, Isuru, the younger son of Rear Admiral Y N Jayaratne (present Director General Operations) touching Mrs. Willy, as his elder brother Anjana looks on at the Coral Cove beach, Trincomalee.

When you read the above headline, you must be wondering what this article could be about. This story is about someone who has made the officers (and their families) who know her at the Naval Base, Trincomalee very happy. Mrs. Willy is a huge Green Sea Turtle, who comes to lay her eggs at the Coral Cove beach, a private beachfront within the Naval Base in Trincomalee. As far as I could relate, she has been coming to the Coral Cove beach to lay her eggs for the past 38 years!

When I was a young Midshipman, then Lieutenant (MCD) Shanthi Kumar Bahar, detailed me for a very unusual task. That was to lay an ambush at the Coral Cove beach at night during the last two weeks of April and first two weeks of May (almost one month), and be on the lookout for the arrival of a huge Green Sea Turtle coming there to lay her eggs. She was known as Mrs. Willy. At first, I felt it was a kind of punishment because the Coral Cove beach was in the jungle next to our firing range, away from our main naval complex. To get there you have to walk approximately one kilometre along a jungle track.

Within a few days, I started to love this task. I had to leave my accommodation soon after dinner (in the Navy, lunch is called dinner, and the dinner is called supper, thanks to Royal Navy terminology!), walk up to the beach, and lay an ambush for Mrs. Willy to appear from the sea and crawl up about 10 metres to lay her eggs. Most of the days I was not alone. One of my friends also joined to spend the night on the beach. We really enjoyed sleeping in the open air on the beach listening to the waves breaking.

The April-May period is inter-monsoonal in the Eastern area. The sea is calm with light breeze. We waited on ambush and sometimes would fall asleep, but suddenly wake up when you see Shanthi Bahar's face in your dreams! Shanthi was a terror at that time.

An distinguished old boy of Trinity College, Kandy, who excels both in studies and sports, young Shanthi joined the Sri Lanka Navy to 3rd Intake of Cadets in 1974. Then he was 19 years old. He was a UK qualified Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) underwater expert and Mine Clearance Diver (MCD) besides being a crack marksman, both rifle and pistol and winner of the first President's Cup in Practical Pistol firing meet in 1984. The late President J.R Jayewardene was so impressed—it was his son, Ravi, who introduced Practical Pistol Firing Sport to Sri Lanka—with Shanthi's ability and presented him with a .45 Colt Gold Cup Pistol as a gift. It is now displayed at our Olympic standard Navy firing range at Welisara. In addition, he was a Navy Coloursman in Sailing and Rowing, who took part in International Sailing Regattas. His knowledge on jungle warfare and small arms was considered exceptional. He was an avid reader. There was no Internet and he used to order Jungle Warfare and gun manuals and magazines through his mother in Hawaii, USA.

All junior officers, especially under trainee ones like me at that time were very much afraid of him. However, after I worked under him onboard the Light House Relief Vessel Pradeepa, and after taking part in Basses Light house relief work, he had a lot of faith in me. When we anchored our ship at Uda Potthana bay, we took a Gemini craft and go to the Yala National park (Yala block 2). I used to follow him in this jungle terrain. I became his follower at very junior level. He had noticed my love for the fishing rod and guns, and started teaching me about guns and jungle warfare. I am yet to see a marksman holding a six- battery torch with one hand, .22 caliber rifle with other hand, aim and fire at night. That was the caliber of Lt. Bahar's marksmanship. To develop such skills you require very strong upper body strength and agility. Anyway, he was a Mine Clearance Diver, trained in the UK with huge lung capacity and very strong arms. His breathing was controlled to near perfection when he fired the weapon. This hand-eye coordination of Lt Bahar came with hard work and training. He would never miss his target. When in action against enemy in close quarters he believed more in accuracy of his repeater shotgun on his right hand than the US manufactured 5.56mm M-16 Carbine slung on his shoulder. With MCD and EOD knowledge, he made his own IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices).

I am extremely grateful to him for what he taught me because these skills and knowledge stood me in good stead while I was training Special Boat Squadron

(SBS - Naval Commando Unit) in November 1993.

It is sad that Lt Commander Shanthi Bahar died during small group operation in Ichchantivu, Muttur on 15th Jan. 1986. He led a 10-man team to target EROS local terrorist leadership and terrorist safe house in Muttur/Ichchantivu sector. All 10 in his team were junior sailors trained by him personally for months. The Divers of SLN helped him to travel from the Naval Base Trincomalee to Muttur in their Diving Unit Dinghy boat and silently landed them near target the area at night. They were able to kill eight terrorists (including their leader), but Lt Commander Bahar and his Muslim informant died of an enemy grenade attack. We lost a great naval officer that day.

It is extremely commendable that senior most among these brave 10 junior sailors, Naval Patrolman (then) KG Samaratunga took over command following the demise of Lt Commander Bahar, regrouped the men and returned to R/V point of Diving Unit boat, carrying body of Lt Commander Bahar. Later, Samaratunga said with tears welling up in his eyes, "Sir, I did exactly

what Bahar Sir had asked me to. He said that if he died, I had to take over the Command and take the boys back to safety." Samaratunga rose up to Master Chief Petty Officer later and was my Master-at-Arms while I was commanding the SBS in 1993. He gained his commission in 1999 and retired as a Lieutenant. He is now engaged in organic farming in Pannala. Great sailors! Unsung heroes!

Lt Commander Bahar was promoted to rank of Commander posthumously and awarded the Rana Wickrama Medal for individual bravery in the face of enemy.

I lost my guru!

Back to the main story. I first met Mrs Willy, 38 years ago on 2nd May. She appeared like a ghost from the sea around midnight. She crawled through the waves, on the coral-sandy beach of Coral Cove with difficulty and settled down near a Banyan (Nuga) tree on the beach. The path she travelled on the beach resembled "tractor tracks" and shined in the moonlight. The moon was on the waxing gibbous phase, which means more than 50% illumination of the moonlight was available throughout the night. Mrs. Willy, under my watchful eyes from a distance, dug a few places for about an hour. However, she did not lay eggs on that day and returned to sea. What a wonderful friend I made at the Coral Cove beach that night!.

Mrs. Willy became a life-long friend. She returned to the beach two days later, and this time she laid eggs. I had been instructed by Lt Commander Bahar not to disturb her while laying eggs, but could touch her while she was returning to the sea. We in the military are sometimes superstitious. We mariners believe touching a fully grown sea turtle would bring us long life. So, I touched Mrs. Willy, this graceful lady, on that day 38 years ago for the first time.

Time passed, and from 15 April to 15 May every year we laid ambushes for Mrs. Willy's arrival at the Coral Cove beach. Our ambushes later became family outings as we went up in the ranks and got older. First with my wife, Yamuna and I camped out in the Coral Cove beach, with food and wine! Sometimes we would fall asleep in the open air while counting stars—my favourite hobby! This is what you live for in this beautiful and God given, beloved country. The Foul Point light house (which was built in 1863 by the British to show entrance to the Trincomalee harbour) was functioning at that time and you could see the looming light from time to time.

Our children joined us later, and it became a family outing. Children with flashlights were watching the sea. They had their own plans for the night. Luckily, school holidays coincided with this period. Ladies would bring delicious food and snacks. Men were busy imbibing. All were waiting for Mrs. Willy's arrival. There would be complete silence until eggs were laid. Children whispering to each other and waiting to touch her one by one while she was returning to the sea. Mrs. Willy got quite used to children touching her over these years. She would sometimes stop moving when approached by a child reluctant to touch her. That was her way of saying, "Baby, Don't be afraid. Please feel free to touch me".

Gradually, we rose up in our ranks and were transferred out of the Trincomalee Naval base. Our children also grew up and they had more important things to do than waiting for Mrs. Willy's arrival on the Coral Cove beach. Around that time, there was intense fighting with the LTTE, and we started placing Naval sentries on the Coral Cove beach at night. One of their tasks during sentry duty at night was to ensure the safety of Mrs. Willy.

It was another delightful occasion to see the baby sea turtles coming out of hatching after 60 to 62 days and crawling to the sea. How many baby sea turtles? Sorry! I always lost count. So many during the last 38 years!

Sadly, Mrs. Willy did not appear during the egg laying period for the last two years. It had happened few times earlier also. Marine Biologists say, some times these huge Green Sea Turtles may not lay eggs every year. But, if they come, like an inbuilt GPS guiding them, they will come to exactly the same spot where they laid their eggs last time. Mrs. Willy's egg laying location is on the Coral Cove beach, under a large Nuga tree. The place was kept very clean during this period. We kept her "delivery room" on the beach clean and ready for her to lay eggs safely and we guarded it until baby sea turtles come out of soft sand and head towards the sea.

I was worried. Mrs. Willy lives in a very dangerous environment at sea, mainly due to human activities. Fishing nets are the biggest threat to sea turtles. The bigger the size of the sea turtle, the greater the danger! So, at Mrs. Willy's size, she faces the danger of getting caught in a fishing net and dying from suffocation and cut injuries. In addition, Sea turtles may eat floating polythene (mistaking it for jellyfish) which would cause their digestive system to get clogged, and die a painful death. I prayed for her.

Good news came from the Eastern Command. Deputy Area Commander (DAC) Commodore PDS Dias on 28th April night around 2230 hrs he had spotted Mrs Willy while she was returning to the sea after laying eggs at the Coral Cove beach at her usual place. Moon was in waxing crescent. With visibility of 20% or less, the DAC was extremely lucky to see Mrs Willy on that day.

Long Live Mrs Willy! Please come back next year. We will be waiting for you my dear friend
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