

SLBC – A nostalgic tour down memory lane

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I joined the SLBC in February, 1968, when Mr. Neville Jayaweera was the Director General. I remember meeting him on the first day at work, he was an imposing figure. The Chief Engineer was Mr. N S Wickremasinghe and he chose to assign me to the Training Institute, where John Hunt (BBC) was in charge of technical training. Sumi Munasinghe was, at that time, Engineer Recording. I spent a couple of years as a teacher at the training institute before I was transferred to be under Tudor Perera, Engineer Studios. There were three of us in the room, the third being Chyshantha Mendis (Engineer).

Tudor's sense of humour and mischief kept us entertained very often. There were times when we played tricks on him too. Tudor was a heavy smoker, and usually drags on his cigarette from the corner of his mouth. Once we stole his packet of cigarettes and inserted thumb nail size crackers inside some of the cigarettes, and we kept that packet back on his table. It was very funny when he lit one of the "doctored" cigarettes and dragged on it. The cigarette exploded and the sight of the surprised look on Tudor's face with the cigarette splayed at the end was so funny that we laughed for days. We also gave such a "doctored" packet of cigarettes the Director General. He fell for it but had the good nature to laugh it off.

Tudor introduced the new Phillips audio mixer to Studio 6. For testing we had the good fortune to have the Savages in the studio. We spent many nights recording the group and putting the mixer through its paces. I think it was Zilan Munas, young producer from the English service who arranged the recording.

An interesting event that took place during this time was the moon landing by Neil Armstrong. The Director General decided that CBC should rebroadcast the commentary of the event live with translations in Sinhala and Tamil. The live broadcast was received from the US and rebroadcast via the CBC transmitter network. It was exciting and very successful to the extent that the minister for Broadcasting at the time hosted a party at his home to all those involved.

The first phase of the MW expansion project began in 1969 with grant aid from the German Government. Gunther Muller from Siemens was the project coordinator for the contractor, Siemens and Siegfried Schmidt was the supervisor from GTZ, a German Government agency which manages projects. This phase involved the establishment of transmitters at Maho, Weeraketiya and Kandy. Mr. R E H Perera, Freddie Gomes, T D Padmasiri, Rabel, Brian Fernando are a few names that come to mind as those who were connected to this project. The Director General had nearly weekly progress meeting to ensure that all went to plan and schedule. The local architect for the project was Lala Adhitiya. He was also very knowledgeable about veddhas and he used to go the veddha areas to record their lifestyle.

When Mr. N S Wickramasinghe retired, Mr. David Buel took over. He was a very quiet, soft spoken gentleman. He showed an uncompromising outlook, but inside he was a very caring person. This other side of him revealed itself very rarely. There were many stories about him when he was the EIC at Ekala and Diyagama. For instance, one day when he was driving to Diyagama, he saw a staff member at the bus stand. He gave him a lift to the MW station but as he was late, he promptly called for his explanation for being late. V Sahathevan (Engineer) was attached to Diyagama station until he decided to migrate to the UK in 1971 or 1972. He was very quiet but excellent engineer, who did very well in England.

On another occasion, Tudor was with Mr. Buell; and Hartley Fernando and I decided to play a prank on him. We typed a note to Tudor as if it was coming from Mr. Buell transferring him to a room in the racecourse, where we had the transport section. When Tudor came back to his office and saw this note, the expression on his face was so hilarious that we had trouble in keeping a straight face.

CBC which later became SLBC had very interesting staff, which made life enjoyable.

Lal Hearth was the Superintending Engineer responsible for the regional stations. He was also later involved with the Television Project.

Jerry Holsingher was an interesting person, with his obsession with the triode. He could talk for hours on merits of the valve.

Chandra Dharmapala was the Origami expert and I still remember how to make a frog with piece of paper.

Brian Fernando, I will never forget the three day trip to Mandathivu in his ramshackle van, with its breakdowns on the way.

Email Perera was an interesting character. He had excellent knowledge in electronics and broadcast engineering.

Dharmasiri (VHF room), Anton Perera (Studio maintenance), Mr. C de Silva (Lab), L E Tillekeratne (OB), S P Jayasundara, Shanti Fonseka, C R M Abeynayake and many others contributed in their unique ways to the well being of the organization. They also contributed to the interesting mix of personalities that I remember very nostalgically. There was never a dull moment with them around.

The second and the third phases of the medium wave expansion project saw the establishment of stations at Mandathivu, Ampara, Kantalai, Mahiyangana, Ambewela and Ratnapura with an additional VHF transmitter at Karagahathenna.

There were changes to the top management. After Mr. Jayaweera, Mr Susil Moonasinghe took over and soon it was the height of the insurgent uprising. Mr Moonasinghe was op-opted as volunteer army officer and used come to office in the army uniform. He looked very smart in that outfit.

At some stage the head of SLBC was made the Chairman and there was then a Director General in addition.

At one time the Chairman Ridgway Tillekeratne was also the Secretary to the Ministry of State and used to work in SLBC one half of the day and the other half in the Ministry. There were stories about how he as the Chairman would refer papers to the Secretary for decisions making a note the documents " Secy, For approval pl" and then when he goes to the Ministry would reply " CH, Approved (or not Approved as the case may be)" and send the document back.

During Mr. Tillekeratne's time the Technical Officers Union made some demands and were threatening industrial action. The Engineers at the time had also formed an association to fight for salary revision in par with that of the CEB. Chairman called us and wanted us to keep the transmitters on if the TOU went on strike. We had an association meeting and decided that we could not dilute the TOU's industrial action and the listening public must know that there is an industrial dispute taking place in the SLBC, we therefore decided that we can only have a limited service in operation. The TOU was happy with our decision and the Chairman was informed accordingly. After Mr. Tillekeratne the next Chairman was Mr Eamon Kariyakarawane. He gave our demands for a salary revision.

The SLBC was heavily involved with providing communication assistance to all the journalists who attended the Non-Aligned conference in 1976. Direct voice casts to their home countries were provided for these journalists from the specially built studios at the SLBC.

The advent of Television was in 1979 when ITN went on air on the Sinhala and Tamil New year -14 April. It was soon taken over by the Government and SLBC managed it under Mr. D T L Guruge as the Competent Authority. The taking over party were Sunil Abeysundara (Consultant Ministry of State), myself and Shanthi Fonseka. It was an awkward situation for me as I knew Shan Wijewardene. The ITN staff did a magnificent job to improve the coverage of the fledgling station. N P Meegama was responsible for increasing the height of the mast at Pannitpitya. SLBC had some excellent riggers at the time led by Gunasoma. Ananda Wettasinghe repaired the transmitter. Hartley Fernando , Sri Skandarajah, K N Gunewardene, Chandra Munasinghe (News) and many others contributed to the establishment of the first television station as a successful commercial venture. Coverage of the Royal Wedding, Moscow Olympics and funeral of Sir John Kotalawala proved to the public that ITN was a Television station to be taken notice of.

The National TV project was managed by the SLBC. Shanthilal Nanayakkara, Gnanasingham, Shanthi De Fonseka, Hartley Fernando, Freddie Gomes, M Gunadasa were some who were involved with the project.

In 1979 Mr. David Buell was in charge of the National Television Project and on the eve of the arrival of the second feasibility survey team from Japan, climbed Mount Pidurutalagala to inspect the proposed site for the main transmitter station. He passed away with a heart attack on his way to the summit. It was a great loss to SLBC and to broadcasting in Sri Lanka. I was at the airport, with H M Gunesekera, on my way to Malaysia for a seminar at the AIBD. As I was checking in there was an announcement for me to report to the counter as there was a phone call for me. When I went to answer it was Mr. Guruge who informed me that Mr. Buell has passed away and wanted me return to take over as the 2nd Japanese feasibility team was due in few days. I went back to SLBC and Mr Guruge instructed me to go to Nuwera Eliya mortuary to bring back Mr Buell's body. We arranged a hearse to accompany me and brought Mr. Buell back. Mr. Buell was given full honours at his funeral , with the SLBC staff paying their respects which he richly deserved. The Japanese team was very upset and sad when they heard about Mr. Buell.

I was practically thrown into the deep end taking over as Director Engineering of SLBC and taking over the responsibility of the National Television Project. However, with excellent staff and their cooperation, everything fell into place.

Because Mr. Buell passed away when he was involved with the National Television Project, it was decided that we should make a vow both at the Kataragama devale and Saman devale in Ratnapura.

The Chairman at the time was Mr Eamon Kariyakarawane. He was a very jovial person but had quite astute financial sense. It was during his time that SLBC refused the annual grant from the Government and started making profits. The buoyant economic situation of the country at the time helped in increasing advertising revenue. He used to say the money must be “rolled” to make more money. He used say jokingly that coins are made round so that they can be “rolled”.

The trip to Kataragama involved all the senior staff of the SLBC and the Japanese team. It was long trip to Kataragama and Ratnapura in, I think, two days. The Japanese were quite exhausted when we returned quite late. The vow at Kataragama was to offer a replica of the Kirivehera (if I remember right) and at the Saman devale, to offer a sandalwood elephant to the Adam’s peak temple and broadcast the annual ceremony live on TV over the country. This last vow was completed in March 1987, when we had the necessary equipment for the live broadcast. It was great success where one could say that the whole country woke up early to watch the telecast.

The construction of the National Television network was completed on schedule and the network was named Sari Lanka Rupavahini Corporation. I joined the new station in January 1981, as the first head of engineering. Several SLBC technical staff were selected to be transferred to the new corporation. I must say they were excellent staff, who really built the corporation to a very popular channel. Mr M J Perera was appointed as the first Chairman of the new organization, after awhile Dr Anura Gunesekera was appointed as the Director General. We had an excellent opportunity to put the entire network through its paces before the inauguration, when Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth visited Sri Lanka in 1981. The Army Parade, Kandy Perahera, opening of the Victoria Dam were the main events covered during her stay and the entire network performed extremely well.

ITN was handed over to the Ministry of Finance as it became a Government owned business undertaking. There was friendly competition between the two organisations. ITN was managed by Mr. D T L Guruge as the Competent Authority.

When the ethnic conflict took center stage, things began to be difficult. In the mid 90’s when the Kokavil TV transmitter station was attacked, the management decided that the station should be manned by SLRC staff. At that time the equipment were remotely operated and there was an army platoon providing security. It fell on my shoulders to select someone from engineering to be sent to Kokavil. It was very hard decision, which I didn’t like to take. But Jayantha Wickramasinghe (engineer transmitters) put his hand up. The next day we flew on an air force helicopter to Kokavil. It was heart breaking to leave him and wave good bye when we took off not knowing if I will see him again. I am grateful to him for taking that burden of deciding who should be sent, off from me. I was relieved when we were able bring him back after sometime.

In 1987, I decided to migrate to Australia and resigned in August of that year.