

## THE PIONEER FORCE: AN ACCOUNT OF A PARAMILITARY CORPS OF GOVERNMENT SERVANTS WHO SERVED IN CEYLON AND MALAYA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

RAJAKRISHNAN A/L RAMASAMY

In this article it is attempted to present a brief discussion of a unique corps of men who had served in Ceylon and Malaya in the nineteenth century and contributed enormously to the development of public works in both the colonies, then under the British rule. They are considered unique for the simple reason that they possessed skills as artisans, surveyors and technicians and at the same time trained in military discipline. They were also employed as government servants by the Public Works Department of Ceylon.

The establishment of British political power in Ceylon in 1795 and the subsequent introduction of an official development policy, aimed at providing the essential communication services, resulted in extensive public works being undertaken. But the inadequate supply of not only experienced men with technical knowledge but also of skilled labour to work on the construction of these public works hampered progress of work. Educational development in the early nineteenth century was in its formative stages and there was hardly any experienced men to meet the demands of this department. It was this inadequacy that prompted Sir Edward Barnes, the then Governor of Ceylon, to conceive of a plan to recruit men from India to work in Ceylon.

In 1821 Sir Edward Barnes raised a corps of men recruited from Madras Presidency in South India and formed it into a semi-military organisation. It became known as the Pioneer Force and the men enlisted were required to sign a regular attestation. There were at first eight divisions with two hundred men each, and each division was commanded by a Subaltern, an officer of the army serving in Ceylon. The whole Force was placed under the command of a Senior Officer who was assisted by an Adjutant who also performed the duties of a Paymaster. While the Senior Officer was an engineer, the eight Subalterns served as assistant engineers in the Force.<sup>1</sup>

Being a semi-military corps, the men were subjected to the same kind of military discipline that the army received. Those who committed offences were subjected to light punishments at the discretion of their Commanding Officer. However such punishments were rarely meted out as the military training they had received had infused in them a high sense of discipline and obedience. Regarding the maintaining of discipline in the Force, Major Thomas Skinner, the Commanding Officer, recorded that "the whole secret of my success with these men has been my half yearly inspection of them at which I write the character &c., Sc., of every individual since the last inspection — by these records promotions are regulated, Pensions determined, punishments (of rare occurrence) by reduction of rank are inflicted — the drunkard

<sup>1</sup>Skinner, T. *Memorandum with reference to the Pioneer Force employed by the Government of Ceylon called for by the Colonial Secretary's letter No. 376 of the 16th April 1866.* para 3, Pending File (PF) 849, (Department of National Archives, Colombo).

and ill conducted is admonished until at last he makes up his mind to reform".<sup>2</sup> He states further about the "ceremony of touching my hand" pledging to reform oneself and such pledges were never broken. Such order, discipline and inspections were maintained throughout so as to keep the men under control.

In 1833 with the establishment of the Civil Engineer's Department the Force came under the direction of civil authorities who continued to maintain it as a semi-military corps. They sent regular detachments to the military garrison at Kandy for the purpose of being drilled and the Commandant there noted with pleasure that members of the corps learnt their drill with extraordinary aptitude. Earl Grey, the Secretary of Colonies, fearful that the Force might lose discipline, even suggested that the whole Force should be divided into sections and that each section should undergo two weeks of military drill and training at the central depot every year. The result of such training made the men in physique "superior to our native troops and in every respect far superior to the Police Force of the Colony".<sup>4</sup>

Under civil authorities the structure and constitution of the Corps remained unchanged. Each division had an Officer, a Clerk, a Medical Officer, a Sergeant-Major, 2 Sergeants, 3 Corporals, 5 First Class Artificers, 5 Second Class Artificers, 25 Third Class Artificers, 45 Fourth Class Artificers, 120 Pioneers and 10 boys making a total of about 220 men.<sup>5</sup> They were surveyors, engineers, overseers, masons, builders, carpenters, bricklayers and artisans.

Initially almost all the men were recruited from India through Messrs Oliver and Company but in 1876 arrangements were made with the Madras Government to recruit for the Force in Madura, Tanjore and Trichinopoly districts.<sup>6</sup> Usually a Pioneer Sergeant-Major, accompanied by two Pioneers, was sent to recruit men. The new recruits were brought before the Government officials at Madura to be despatched to Colombo. Each Pioneer who had recruited about ten persons was expected to accompany them to Ceylon, and the escort returned again for a further lot of men. Each recruit was advanced a fixed sum of money to meet his food and clothing expenses by the Collector at Madura which was subsequently defrayed by the Ceylon Government.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the Pioneers were allowed a bonus of Rs 10/- per head for recruiting, including their pay, provided they wore the Pioneer uniform at all times. The recruits were often employed on three-year contracts renewable at the end of each period and on retirement were pensionable. Being a paramilitary corps, indents for clothing of the Pioneers were met by the Ceylon Government.

Due to inevitability of regular casualties in the Force as a result of desertion or death, it was sometimes replenished by men recruited locally in Ceylon. Many of these locally recruited men were Tamils whose willingness to seek employment was commented as exemplary as op-

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, para 22.

<sup>3</sup>Bingham, P.M. *History of the Public Works Department, Ceylon. 1796-1913.* (Colombo, 1921), p. 182.

<sup>4</sup>PF 849, *op. cit.*, para 16.

<sup>5</sup>Bingham, P.M. *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>7</sup>*Despatches from Governor, Ceylon, to Colonial Secretary, Government of Madras.* 17.8.1903.

posed to that of the others. The latter were described<sup>8</sup> as having declined to offer themselves for employment although the Government was prepared to pay a daily rate of 9¼d for a private in the artificer division and 7½d in the working division<sup>9</sup> with rations of money and kind for their wives and a large bonus on enlistment. Similarly an attempt was made to recruit men from Northern India for the Pioneer Force in 1863 which also failed.<sup>10</sup> A group of Sikhs who had enlisted for the Third Division of Pioneers in Kandy refused to work on the excuse that they were recruited on false pretences. They were ready to fight if required, but refused to work on road construction. The Commanding Officer arrested the leaders, but the men were adamant and the Government finally repatriated them. Thus the men who formed the ranks of this Pioneer Force were invariably drawn from Southern India who were hardworking, prepared to work under unhealthy conditions and easily disciplined.

The strength of the Pioneer Force fluctuated with the needs of the Public Works Department of Ceylon and there was also the difficulty of getting new recruits. In 1867 there were nominally twenty divisions with two hundred and thirty-seven men in each division but as the number employed was deficient by fifty per cent, it was decided to reduce the number of divisions to twelve. In subsequent years due to continuing deficiency and increasing facilities for obtaining skilled labour locally, the Government decided to reduce further the number of divisions to ten. In 1880 an order from the Colonial Secretary required the Pioneer Force to be reduced to seven divisions by amalgamation of three divisions with others.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, in 1882, it was felt that the strength of the Force was greater than required for the public works of the colony, owing to the system of having works executed on contract and the abundance of skilled labour to be hired locally.<sup>12</sup> The Pioneers were required only as a nucleus around which hired labour could be collected or to be employed upon any special works that required exceptionally skilled workmen. In 1882 nearly the whole Force, which stood at six divisions, was lent to contractors for the Nawalapitiya and Nanu-Oya railway for the erection of large viaducts and other difficult tasks that could not be carried out by hired labour.

In Ceylon the most valuable contributions of the Pioneer Force were in the Public Works, Drainage and Irrigation Departments. It was mainly through the efforts of these Pioneers that many thousands of miles of roads and railways and canals and bridges were constructed. The Director of Public Works Department, Ceylon, stated in 1870 that "it is impossible to open out new roads without a force of trained Pioneers; in sickly, out of the way districts, ordinary labourers will not work, and skilled labour for building bridges, &c., cannot be obtained at

<sup>8</sup>De Silva, C.R. *Ceylon Under British Occupation 1795-1833*. (Colombo, The Colombo Apothecaris Co., Ltd., 1953), p. 405; Ferguson, J., (ed.) *Pioneers of the Planting Enterprise in Ceylon: From 1830 Onwards* Vol. 1, (Colombo, 1894), p. 3. He notes that the Sinhalese refused to do hard and continuous work on the plantations which resulted in large scale immigration of South Indians to Ceylon.

<sup>9</sup>Bingham, P.M. *op. cit.*, p. 183: The daily rate of pay in 1864 for a Sergeant Major was 2s, a Sergeant 1s. 6., a Corporal 1s. 4d., a 1st Class Artificer 2s, a 2nd Class Artificer 1s. 6d., a 3rd Class Artificer 1s, a 4th Class Artificer 9d, a Pioneer 8d, a boy 4½d and a woman 1d as a family allowance.

<sup>10</sup>Bingham, P.M. *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>11</sup>*Despatches from Colonial Secretary, Colombo to Director, Public Works Department, Ceylon*. No. 275 of 20th February 1880.

<sup>12</sup>"Public Works Department", *Ceylon Administration Report*, 1882. p. 2.

any price".<sup>13</sup> Even the Select Committee on Retrenchment set up in 1882 to suggest possible economies to offset the excesses in government expenditure noted the valuable services of the Pioneer Establishment to the colony in the construction of roads and irrigation works.<sup>14</sup> The Pioneer Force had been the nursery for skilled labour in Ceylon which became available in all parts of Ceylon towards the end of the 19th century.

From 1878 onwards the progressive decrease in revenue and the subsequent curtailment of public works had left the Public Works Department with an unduly large staff on Pioneers for whom gainful employment could not be sought except for some who were employed by railway contractors. Four divisions of Pioneers were lent to the contractors for the construction of large masonry works in the Dimbula railway and they formed a nucleus around which hired labourers were employed, thus ensuring that work done was of good standard.<sup>15</sup> However this type of employment for the Pioneers was expected to terminate at the end of April 1883 after which the Corps will be without work. Although it was suggested by the Select Committee on Retrenchment to disband three out of the six divisions considered redundant, the Government showed some reluctance because "the men will most of them be entitled to pension on retirement and if disbanded, would receive pension at once".<sup>16</sup>

It was around this time that the Perak Government which had undertaken the construction of a railway line from Taiping to Port Weld in Perak faced severe problems related to labour shortage and inexperienced staff. The railway line was essential for the transportation of tin from the interior to the port for export. Unable to proceed further with the construction of this railway, the project was on the verge of being abandoned when the Resident of Perak, Sir Hugh Low, was informed of the existence of the Pioneer Establishment, and he subsequently wrote to the Straits Settlements Government to recruit and form a corps of men similar to the Pioneer Force in Ceylon to complete the railway line and undertake other future projects.<sup>17</sup> In view of the great scarcity of labour in Perak the Resident even suggested providing "a scale of pensions and other necessary advantages on a scale of liberality which would induce some of the trained men and officers to enlist in its service".<sup>18</sup>

Although Sir Hugh Low requested for a force of seven divisions with one hundred men in each division, the Ceylon Government consented to despatch two divisions initially and a third division subsequently if sufficient number of volunteers came forward.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile the Government of Selangor had also requested for a division of Pioneers to assist in the public works of this State. The Ceylon Government consented to transfer the services of two divisions of Pioneers under the following conditions: that they were lent on a term of three years with a possible extension with the consent of both Governments, the existing conditions of service were maintained, the increased cost of living calculated at fifty per cent on Ceylon pay of the

<sup>13</sup>"Public Works Department", *Ceylon Administration Report*, 1870. p. 5.

<sup>14</sup>"Report of the Select Committee on Retrenchment", *Ceylon Sessional Paper*. No. 38. 1883.

<sup>15</sup>"Public Works Department", *Ceylon Administration Report*, 1886. p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>*Despatches from Colonial Secretary, Ceylon to Secretary of State, London*. 18.4.1883.

<sup>17</sup>*Despatches from Sir Hugh Low to Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements*, 5.10.1882.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Despatches from Colonial Secretary, Ceylon, to Secretary of State, London*. 18.4.1883.

Force be provided, that the Straits Settlements Government pay the proportion of pension and return passages to be granted to members of the Force.<sup>20</sup> As the men were almost exclusively natives of India, prior permission was sought and received from the Government of Madras regarding the matter.<sup>21</sup> Two divisions of Pioneers who had accepted the above conditions were sent to the Straits Settlements in May 1883 commanded by H.T.S. Ward and J. Trump, officers of the Public Works Department, Ceylon. The Pioneers were all accompanied by their families.

The two divisions of Pioneers sent to Perak consisted of experienced men who had just completed work on the building of the Nawalapitiya and Nanu Oya railway line in Ceylon. On arrival they took upon themselves the arduous task of completing the eight mile railway line from Taiping to Port Weld, the first railway line in Malaya. It was completed and opened for traffic in June 1885, thus meeting the needs of miners in the neighbourhood of Taiping.<sup>22</sup> In Selangor these Pioneers undertook the construction of the twenty-two mile railway line connecting Kuala Lumpur to Klang in 1884, thus providing easy communication between the mining centre and headquarters of the Government with that of the principal port of Selangor.<sup>23</sup> This railway line was opened for traffic in September 1886. These were the only two railway lines in Malaya before 1890.

In road construction the Pioneer Force was responsible for the building of the road connecting Taiping to Kuala Kangsar which was considered hardly fit for vehicles until the Pioneers made it into one of the best sections of road in Perak<sup>24</sup> The construction of this road through the Gapis Pass which divided Larut and Kuala Kangsar was aptly described as a most creditable work which greatly facilitated the rapidly growing traffic between the mines of Kuala Kangsar and Port Weld. "Its construction involved cutting and blasting through rocks of the toughest description and the building of retaining walls and culverts on a scale never before attempted in a Malay State".<sup>25</sup> The Pioneer Force laid the foundations of modern road construction in Malaya.

Mainly due to the difficulties of acquiring skilled and experienced labour in Malaya, the Government turned towards Ceylon for the services of the Pioneer Force. The Pioneers who came to Malaya, though earned comparatively better than in Ceylon, had to undergo the hazards of diseases which claimed many lives of these Pioneers within a short period of time. The Malay States were covered with virgin jungle and diseases like malaria took a heavy toll of human lives who worked on railway and road construction. Casualties were high as the men lost their strength from continued attacks of fever. In October 1883, six months after arrival in Malaya, there were nine widows who had applied for compassionate allowance as their husbands died

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Despatches from Colonial Secretary, Singapore, to Colonial Secretary, Ceylon. 2.2.1883; Despatches from Secretary to Government of India to Colonial Secretary, Ceylon. 17.2.1883.*

<sup>22</sup>Swettenham, F. *British Malaya*. (London, J. Lane, 1908), pp. 239-240; *Annual Report of Perak 1885*, p. 59; *Straits Settlements Council Proceedings*. Council Paper No. 10, 1884.

<sup>23</sup>Swettenham, F. *op. cit.*, Swettenham, F. *Footprints of Malaya*. (London, Hutchinson, 1942), pp. 82-83.

<sup>24</sup>Swettenham, F. *About Perak*, (Singapore, Straits Times Press, 1893), p. 20; Treacher, W.H. *Perak Annual Handbook 1892*. (Taiping, 1893), p. 156.

<sup>25</sup>*Proceedings of the Legislative Council, Straits Settlements*. Council Paper No. 27, 1886.

of cholera while engaged on the railway construction at Port Weld.<sup>28</sup> In 1886, it was on record that in the First Division of Pioneers two hundred and thirty-five cases of males were treated in the hospital of whom nine died, fifty-one cases of females of whom five died, and eight men were discharged as unfit for service, while in the second division, three hundred and ninety persons were treated in the hospitals, with an average of fourteen persons being sick daily.<sup>27</sup> Such were the dangers and difficulties that the Pioneers braved to work on the road and railway construction in early Malaya.

Just as in Ceylon where the Pioneer Force assisted in the initial construction of roads and railways before a ready supply of skilled labour was available, so also in Malaya where the British established supremacy in the Malay states in the latter part of the nineteenth century, they had to depend on the Pioneer Force and subsequently on immigrant labour to undertake the laying of roads and railways. These public works were important not only for the modernizing influence it brought along with it, but were also responsible for opening up of the Malay States to commercial interests which led to rapid developments towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A commendable feature of this Force was that they acted as a nucleus around which local hired labour could be collected to work on the public works. These hired labour in turn acquired the skills of the Pioneer Force and made themselves available for future public works in Malaya.

On completion of their initial contract, the two divisions of Pioneers returned to Ceylon although the two Officers, H.T.S Ward and J. Trump, stayed behind and obtained employment in Malaya.<sup>28</sup> The number of Pioneers in the Establishment dwindled thereafter and in December 1887 there were only 423 members which further fell to 295 in 1894. Officers of the Public Works Department, Ceylon, did not evince much interest to maintain or increase the strength of the Force as sufficient skilled local labour in Ceylon was available. The only difficulty encountered by them was in inducing the local labour to work in unhealthy localities. However, in 1903, the Pioneer Force stood at only one hundred and forty-three men (seventy-eight in the Irrigation Department and sixty-five in the Public Works Department).<sup>29</sup>

That such a force of men trained in military discipline capable of not only providing their services if required for the preservation of internal order in the country,<sup>30</sup> but also skilled enough to carry out public works involving technical knowledge existed for almost three-quarters of a century appears to be a unique phenomenon in this region. Comprised of men recruited from South India, proficient in skills like masonry, carpentry and brickmaking, and supervised by officers with technical experience, the Pioneer Force had contributed directly to the construction and expansion of public works in Ceylon and Malaya, and indirectly by evolving a new class of skilled men in both the countries who undertook future public works. Wherever they worked and whichever public project they completed, their services were admired, for they

<sup>26</sup>*Despatches from Resident, Perak, to Colonial Secretary, Singapore.* 9.10.1883.

<sup>27</sup>*Proceedings of the Legislative Council, Straits Settlements.* Council Paper No. 27, 1886.

<sup>28</sup>H.T.S. Ward became Assistant Engineer, Lower Perak and Batang Padang in November 1886, while J. Trump became Deputy State Engineer, Perak, in October 1886.

<sup>29</sup>*Despatches from Director, Public Works Department, Ceylon, to Colonial Secretary, Ceylon.* 2.4.1903.

<sup>30</sup>PF 849, *op. cit.*, para 17.

were a paramilitary corps observing discipline and prepared to work in unhealthy locations. Their services were invaluable to Ceylon, for mainly through their services most of the public works and lines of roads and railways were carried out. In Malaya their service has been responsible for the first roads and railways as there was nothing deserving the name of a road or railway which existed for at least a decade after the British established power in Malaya.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### *Primary Sources*

- Annual Report of Perak, 1885.* Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur.  
*Ceylon Administration Reports 1870, 1882.* Department of National Archives, Colombo.  
*Ceylon Sessional Papers 1883.* Department of National Archives, Colombo.  
*Colonial Office Records, Lot 6.* Department of National Archives, Colombo.  
*Pending File 849,* Department of National Archives, Colombo.  
*Straits Settlements Council Proceedings, 1884.* Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur.  
*Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings, 1886,* Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur.

##### *Secondary Sources*

- Bingham, P.M *History of the Public Works Department, Ceylon. 1796-1913.*  
De Silva, C.R. *Ceylon Under British Rule 1975-1833,* Colombo, The Colombo Apothecaries Co. Ltd., 1953.  
Swettenham, F. *About Perak.* Singapore, New Straits Times Press, 1893.  
Swettenham, F. *British Malaya.* London, J. Lane, 1908.  
Swettenham, F. *Footprints of Malaya.* London, Hutchinson, 1942.  
Treacher, W.H. *Perak Annual Handbook, 1892.* Taiping, 1893.