

The 5th Column standing tall

He can't just p

I was flattered when the editor suggested that I should pen some lines at a time when the Sunday Times is celebrating 25 years. I did tell him that the '5th Column' was still only in its 24th year, but he wouldn't take the hint!

It all began in late March 1989: a different era in almost a different country.

Ranasinghe

Premadasa had assumed the Presidency a few months earlier and a general election had just ended. When Premadasa announced his new cabinet, there were many surprises.

Stalwarts such as Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake had been "demoted". Others such as Vi. Ja. Moo Lokubandara, still wet behind the ears politically, were given responsibilities apparently beyond their capabilities.

Intending to poke fun at this, I wrote a short article, about a school principal changing the subjects taught by teachers in the new school term. I handed it over to the then Features Editor of the Sunday Times, Kendall Hopman. He read it, smiled and passed it on to the then editor, Vijitha Yapa.

The next thing I knew was Vijitha Yapa asking me to do a weekly column. I was horrified. The article was meant to be more in jest than anything else and was supposed to be a 'one-off'. Mr. Yapa, however, was editing his third newspaper; he asked me to 'just give it a try'.

The column that appeared was titled the '5th Column', suggesting something sinister, by 'Ryp Van Winkle', named partly after the character created by Washington Irving in his short story, who wakes up after a twenty-year slumber. The caricature of a bald man with an overgrown beard accompanied it.

And so it has remained for the past 24 years, through a span of four Presidents, seven Prime Ministers, a World Cup victory, the end of a civil war and of course, the reins of the Sunday Times being taken over shortly afterwards by Sinha Ratnatunga who simply allowed me to continue writing.

The '5th Column' opened many doors, sometimes with hilarious consequences. Once it led to an invitation to tour the United States for four months. I happily assumed that I could resume the column on my return. The editor, however, had other ideas; he wanted me to write from the US.

This was when communications were still in the pre-historic era. There was no internet or e-mail and Steve Jobs hadn't thought of the I-phone yet. We all relied on the fax machine. In the US, they didn't know where Sri Lanka was on the map, so



news about the country would be hard to come by.

As the editor suggested, the Sunday Times faxed me its political column to the hotel I was staying -- a different one every week. I would place the faxes together, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, sometimes with the pieces overlapping each other, read it, get an idea, write a column and fax it to the Sunday Times!

When I got married, I took the column with me for the wedding. As I went around greeting guests, Keith Noyahr, instead of wishing me asked, "Machang, have you got the column?" and I passed him the sheets of paper. That kind of tenacity would cause Keith to leave the country years later.

On my honeymoon, hundreds of miles away from Colombo, I managed to find a copy of the Sunday Times: the column had been printed and around it was a border of wedding bells - a touching gesture by the Sub-Editors' desk!

Many were lampooned in the column but only a few complained, possibly because it was in lighter vein. I recall just one: Gamini Fonseka, who was asked how he could serve as a Governor under Chandrika Kumaratunga when he had mocked Sirima Bandaranaike in the film Sagarayak Meda.

In a case of mistaken identity, Gamini believed the column was written by another columnist-who did have a beard and a caricature of himself in a column written under his real name-and castigated him severely in Parliament! In fact, many have mistakenly attributed the '5th Column' to this gentleman.

Times have changed over two dozen years and so has the '5th Column'. Instead of painstakingly writing in long hand, columns can now be typed and e-mailed. Instead of occupying the bottom of the editorial page, it now sits on the opposite page in what is literally the fifth column of that page.

Some practices though, have not changed. I have never ever been told what to write or what not to write by the editor or the publisher of the Sunday Times. Over 24 years, I have received no such instructions. That, I believe, is enough incentive to try and continue writing the '5th Column'.

BY AMEEN IZZADEEN

Just as much as any other business venture, a newspaper company also aims at profit. Although the radical anti-capitalist would slam a newspaper tycoon for reducing the people's right to know to a commodity, a publisher plays an unenviable role in promoting democracy at some considerable risk.

For his own physical and financial survival, a publisher has to play a balancing act. And we saw the Sunday Times publisher walking the tightrope in the 1988-1990 era.

On the one hand, he had to be circumspect to protect his business, the success of which was vital not only for him but also for hundreds of employees. On the other, he had to give journalists the freedom to write and highlight social injustices, corruption at the top and political skulduggery, among other things that earned him the wrath of the powers-that-be. This was indeed walking a tightrope.

Never in Sri Lanka's media history had journalists and publishers of independent newspapers come under so much threat from so many quarters as they did during the 1988-90 era of terror. It was during this era that for the first time in Sri Lanka's history, a journalist was abducted and killed.

The government of the day, fighting two insurrections - one in the north and the other in the south - was so sensitive to newspaper reports that it had its own warped criteria to measure a newspaper's anti-government-ness. The Sunday Times was branded an anti-government newspaper. One article that made the then President, R. Premadasa, furious was a translation of a Q&A with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna leader Rohana Wijeweera who was leading the youth insurrection in the south. At a meeting in Pannala, the President warned the Sunday Times publisher in language that shocked the people who heard it. He accused the publisher of being a donor for the opposition.