My Half Year of Living Dangerously

We streamed into the small country, looking for truth, adventure, but, most of all, expense-account receipts. Then one day, Hillmore disappeared in the jungle

YOU KNOW, WHEN I FIRST STARTED IN JOURNALISM I USED TO THINK THAT FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS SPOKE EVERY LANGUAGE UNDER THE SUN AND SPENT THEIR LIVES STUDYING INTERNATIONAL CONDITIONS. BROTHER, LOOK AT US!
FROM *SCOOP*, BY EVELYN WAUGH

"Heading off in search of truth and accuracy?" I called across the lobby of the Meridien hotel to Peter Hillmore of the London *Observer*.

"Well, yes, sort of," he replied with understated British sarcasm. "I was heading over to the Indian High Commission for a briefing, if that's what you mean."

Like other foreign correspondents who that week had swarmed Colombo, the low-slung, grubby capital of war-torn Sri Lanka, Hillmore was trying to maintain his genial spirits while keeping anxious editors at bay and rivals within sight. The story that had swept us all into town was compelling, as siege stories always are: A few thousand Tamil Tiger

BY WILLIAM MCGOWAN

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phens. "You've heard of social climbers?" Hillmore asked. "Well, Palling is a social mountaineer."

Palling was certainly a send-up. Dressed in full safari suit—a copy, he told me, of an old imperial design—he carried Trollope novels under his arm and only occasionally let the passable English accent lapse into his roughneck Aussie twang. "Bruce, what is your real accent anyway?" someone once asked him, turning Palling as scarlet as the sherry by his side.

"Start the cartoon," one of the reporters laughed in the briefing room of the Indian High Commission, nicknamed the Blue Lavatory for the revolting hue of its tiles. The Indians' claims were as preposterous as their spokesperson—a balloonish yet foxy woman in a slinky sari who reminded me of the voluptuous Hindu love goddesses on ancient bronzes. The hundred or so reporters clustered before her were an impressive lot, though they treated her rather gently. In the front of the room, covered with local road maps the way blankets cover a racehorse, was the correspondent for the prestigious *Times* of London. Nicknamed the Brigadier for his silver hair and lordly bearing, he had heard a vital bit of information: where to get "massages." A famed Vietnam-era reporter for *The Washington Post* had been dispatched from Rome to cover for their regular man, who was down with Delhi belly, and wore an air of having seen it all before. Then there was a BBC fireman who'd been sent in to provide "color" reports but who, in the venerable tradition of British journalism, seemed to turn ashen whenever he was too long away from the bar. Hillmore waved to a competitor from a sensationalistic British tabloid. "He's in his element," Hillmore explained in his trademark conspiratorial whisper. "With a story like this, it's always more important to send in somebody skilled at inventing the facts than in ferreting them out. We have an old saying on Fleet Street: 'Make it early. Make it short. And if you have to, make it up.'"

"We have an old saying on Fleet Street," said Hillmore. " 'Make it early. Make it short. And if you have to, make it up.' "

The prize for fiction, though, went to the Indian spokeswoman, who labeled anything that went against her own delusional version of events as "disinformation," "blatant lies" or "a canard," the last pronounced with a provocative sneer. The Indians, her line went, were noble peacekeepers fighting a band of ruthless terrorists with one hand tied behind their backs to minimize civilian hardship. It was an upended Alice in Wonderland world she told us about, where white was black and black was white.

Our ad hoc professional organization, Press Hacks Under Custody in Colombo, or PHUCC, met in the lobby afterward for a burst of pre-deadline plagiarism, with notes and quotes swapped with gusto. As the dinner hour neared, Hillmore asked, "Is anybody hungry or should we just send out for some receipts?"—alluding to the liberties many correspondents take with their expense vouchers. However, crucial information filtered in while we lingered over a second dessert. Someone had uncovered the existence of midrange prostitutes, more affordable than the pricey ones flown in from Bangkok by the hotels. "And young, too," drooled one pedophile-reporter. "Yes, I've heard that before," sniffed Hillmore. "She was 13 but had the body of a 12-year-old, right?"

As it turned out, the girls were not quite what was expected. "Dogs. They were dogs," Hillmore, ever the observer, ranted the next morning over the greasy sludge the hotel insisted was coffee. "No. They were worse than dogs. They were elephants. Some didn't even have teeth. We drove all over bloody Colombo and saw elephants. Elephants who wanted you to pay." Meanwhile, another correspondent related how the hotel masseuse had got mad at him when he asked for "extra." "Imagine that," Hillmore said with mock horror, "she got offended."

The auspicious arrival of *Time* photographer Deiter Ludwig guaranteed more diversion. Known as Field Marshall Ludwig for his Prussian severity and martial obsessions, Deiter, who'd cut his teeth as a war photographer in Vietnam, had spent twenty years crisis-hopping across Asia. Although he rarely left his hotel, except to gamble at the casinos, Ludwig had a great seat-of-the-pants sense for combat, perhaps because of the Vietcong mortar fragments left in his rear end, which still set off airport metal detectors. The consummate armchair analyst, Ludwig would spin wild theories about what was going on behind the lines, his face all eyeballs and Apocalypse as his imagination raced into Götterdämmerung.

We moved from the sublime to the ridiculous with a briefing from the British military attaché. It was presumed that he had more of an idea of what was going on in Jaffna than most "Western diplomats," but with his beret and high boots, the attaché cut a figure from a Kipling story, lacking only the monocle and bulldog. "How long can the Indians continue to take such heavy casualties?" one reporter asked. "I dunno," the colonel replied without even a hint of irony. "But this is the Orient, you know. Life doesn't really have any value here. They have millions of them, don't they?"

The Five O'Clock Follies later that day again required a suspension of disbelief, and driven to distraction by Indian stonewalling, Hillmore was holding his own news conference in the back.

"We are doing our best to minimize coverage," he

or Hindu—just for safe measure. Still, it was hard to think about danger, given the mesmerizing tropical beauty of the landscape—the clear blue sky, the iridescent green of the rice paddies, the kids in white school uniforms climbing trees for blossoms they'd lay at the feet of Buddhas. Swarms of yellow butterflies traced lazy arcs across the black tar road.

Hillmore was at his best, dishing tidbits from his days as a gossip writer, the most enjoyable being the one about the famous American model who had left her "signature" in an old English manor house by dipping her bum in ink and sitting on the open pages of the guest book. This led to a contest to see who could think of the most difficult place to screw. Hillmore's entry—standing in a hammock—took the prize. He also launched another round of broadsides at the appalling Palling and took particular delight in telling about the time Palling had tried to drop, but forgot, the exceptionally tony name of some woman he had "rogered"—"the social grenade that never went off," Hillmore dubbed it.

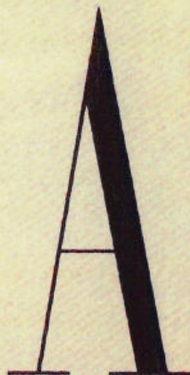
The road was swarming with Indian soldiers, who, eyeing us suspiciously, cocked rifles at us as they searched our vehicle.

Getting into shell-pummeled, bullet-shattered Jaffna and getting out again would be no mean feat, and funeral banners stretched across the road as we drove through the tiny villages took on greater significance. We'd have to circumvent Indian checkpoints somehow, then boat across the lagoon to the Jaffna peninsula—if the water was crossable, what with all the helicopter surveillance. And then there was the small matter of avoiding rebel land mines until we could make contact with the guerrillas and get an escort. I had seen the remains of soldiers killed by mines and couldn't get the picture of the leaky burlap body bags out of my mind. Hillmore, however, was complaining that in all the time he'd spent in this terrorized country, he'd still not had the chance to use his favorite line about a bombing victim: "Friends ran to his side, while others ran to his legs."

We stopped for the night about three quarters of the way to Jaffna at a dusty rest house, where we had been told we might pick up an escort who could smuggle us into the action. Run down by years of war, the rest house had a desperate air. In his sodden hysteria, the proprietor, who said he was a guerrilla sympathizer, blew gusts of whiskey into our faces. "You must tell the world what is happening to our people. You must," he cried.

We were somewhat nervous about proceeding in such a murky situation but felt good about beating the pack. The BBC color man might have been first with an eyewitness report, but he was a radio correspondent, and the honor of being the first print man into the battle was still to be won. Suddenly, though, we heard a booming voice ask, "Where the hell's the fax machine?" and a group from the hotel strolled in. They presumed, however, that we'd already been up to Jaffna and back and wanted to know what it was like. "Indescribable," said Hillmore, peeved at their arrival. "I'm having a hard time putting my experience into words."

The next morning, Hillmore gave the cook a fistful of crumpled rupee notes when he wouldn't make us breakfast because it was a Hindu holiday. "This should straighten out his calendar," Hillmore said. Despite the delay, we got off earlier than the others, and as we drove along, Hillmore kept up a stream of bawdy limericks, Byronic verse and quizzes on the names of obscure African capitals. Years of land mining had left the road so cratered, driving it was somewhat like sailing a small boat through heavy seas. The road was also swarming with Indian soldiers on a sweep of the area, who, eyeing us suspiciously, cocked rifles at us as they searched our vehicle and interrogated our guide. For some inexplicable reason they let us go, and we steered off the road and wove our way along the narrow tracks that threaded between rice paddies. A few hours later, we were racing toward a ferry slip at the lagoon, which boats were, in fact, still crossing. Hillmore, squinting into the sky for helicopters, looked equal parts blithe and anxious. "This is when you start feeling a little guilty," he said. "You've come all the way up here—a grown man—just for a little pop-pop over your head."



A band of teenage rebels met us on the other side and swept us into a van for a bone-jarring last dash toward a command center on the city's periphery. After the trip's harrowing last leg, the lazy atmosphere of the Tiger camp seemed incongruous. The guerrillas, clad in native skirts and rubber thongs, hardly seemed like ruthless terrorists bent on annihilation. The town's matter-of-fact atmosphere seemed equally odd. A twenty-four-hour curfew was in force, but people strolled casually under billboards of revolutionary martyrs. Helicopters and shelling in the distance seemed no more threatening than locusts on a town green in Iowa.

That sense of unreality persisted as the rebels carted us closer to the battle zone, the van now full, since, unfortunately, the other reporters had arrived on our heels. Though the area bore signs of fierce fighting, with its shattered houses and rubble-strewed streets, the whole scene still seemed more like a mechanized version of capture-the-flag than the death throes of a rebel bastion.

We spent the remaining daylight hours waiting in a safe house. The Tigers used the *(continued on page 190)*

(continued from page 157) opportunity to lull us to sleep with revolutionary bombast. War, it seemed, was as it is often described: hours of tedium with a few flashes of panic and fear. Everyone picked up, though, when the Tigers brought in three of their female counterparts for us to interview. Tigresses! Hot news! They burnished the romantic allure of the Tamil militants all the more and made a great angle for the feature section or the women's pages. The reporters began peppering them with inane questions: How did they wear their hair when fighting? What hobbies did they have? Plans for marriage? Had the movement offered them equal opportunity? At first they answered obligingly but then began to look annoyed.

"They thought we were all assholes," I said to the group somewhat testily afterward, thinking the whole performance fairly degrading.

"Do you always think that way after you talk to a woman?" one of the guys countered. Meanwhile, Hillmore had his thoughts on other things. "I'm in love with a freedom fighter," he swooned. "Did you see the one in the middle, so shy and nervous? She was so like a young girl, playing with her cyanide cap like it was a piece of costume jewelry. She was pleasant, too. None of this bombastic dogma. Heavens me."

The next day, as we picked our way through the suburbs to the center of the stricken city, it was hard not to be stirred as the guerrillas readied themselves to take on far superior forces. Young boys relayed orders from street corner to street corner under flapping rebel banners, while at various crossroads Tigers with grenade launchers and assault rifles clustered for action. In the background, civilians huddled nervously in doorways. We corkscrewed through lanes and back alleys lined with dense foliage and woven-palm-frond fences—perfect cover for rebel ambushes and impossible to negotiate without intimacy.

But it was equally hard not to be affected by the vastness of the tragedy we were witnessing. As we were doing interviews, a report crackled over the radio: The Jaffna hospital had been stormed by Indian troops—a major violation of the Geneva convention. Patients and staff were said to have been slaughtered, but we needed corroboration to report the story. We were told that a doctor who had witnessed the atrocity and survived had either fled to another hospital or had taken sanctuary in a refugee camp.

The hospital we went to first was up to its rafters with war victims, mostly civilians shot or shelled at random by the Indians. The open-air wards stank hellishly from grimy bed linens and unclean wounds. Many of the children were missing limbs, and flies clustered in the eyes of some of the wounded who were too dazed to brush them away. One sobbing woman with a tube draining a wound in her back told a story echoed by a hundred others: Too frightened to go to a refugee camp, she had kept her family together at home until Indian troops, searching for elusive guerrillas, had broken down her door, sprayed everyone with bullets point-blank and killed her husband and children, leaving her for dead.

The chaos and squalor of the refugee camp we went through was equally overpowering as thousands of panic-stricken Sri Lankans poured in from other camps that had been inadvertently shelled earlier in the day. The roads leading in were choked with jalopies, bicycles, oxcarts, every conveyance people could pile onto. In the bedlam, only blaring horns rose above the screams of babies. Fragmented families

searched desperately for missing members; old people wandered around in shock. Dusk turned everything ghostly. A child, about 4 years old, his eyes still jiggling in fear, used hand gestures to show me how helicopters had attacked his home. After ten minutes of this I was completely drained. I remembered a magazine article I'd once read about how men love war, an idea that seemed absolutely perverse in the face of the suffering and desolation I saw around me. In the end, we never found the doctor nor did we get confirmation of the hospital slaughter, but the weight of other stories we heard again and again lent it strong credibility.

We had dinner in a gloomy café that had an air of World War I about it, with candles burning in wine bottles and a nervous joie de vivre. Our numbers had been swollen by the arrival of several French journalists and a photographer airlifted in the night before by *Newsweek*, who was a raging parody of the war junkie. "It's an easy story," he snapped flippantly. "Tomorrow morning I'll get refugees, I'll get bang-bang, and then I'll be gone."

Hillmore, meanwhile, was entertaining us with declarations of love for his Tigress and facetious toasts to the wretchedness and suffering that were fueling our story. We became a bit unsettled, though, when a rumor reached us that the Indians knew we had defied their ban and were searching for us. If we left first thing in the morning, we might get out all right, but if we went on an operation with the Tigers into the thick of the fighting, there was great likelihood the Indians would intercept us, with uncertain results. I had been suppressing a lot of fear the last few days, but the beer was helping to unleash it. One of the advantages of buddying up with Hillmore was that in the end I figured he wouldn't go too far into the action; his limp was my excuse. But Hillmore threw me a curveball. "Going to the war tomorrow?" he asked rather dryly, sensing my anxiety as another barrage of shelling erupted in the rain-soaked distance. "A bit of this?"

"Some for adventure,/some from fear of weakness." I woke thinking of Ezra Pound's lines describing the mixed reasons his generation went off to fight WWI. Morning broke in a dawn of cool shadows, shrieking birds and continued shelling—now closer than ever. I had begun to question my reasons for wanting to spend these six months in a country at war. On one level, I had wanted to get to Jaffna so I could write an authoritative report. On a more profound level, though, I wanted to sense the contours and consequences of war, to see what people—including myself—are like when confronted with its terror and chaos, stripped of all certainties. For Hillmore, ironically, going to war seemed more a part of a process of regeneration after his illness. "Seven years ago, the doctors told my wife I'd never leave a wheelchair," he said somewhat abstractly. "And now here I am."

It turned out I didn't have a choice about heading to the front. Everyone else was going, and it would be even more unsafe to try to make my way back to Colombo without them. Great authors have talked about the lure and mystery of going to war and the urge to witness it in all its bouquet and slaughter. Few mention the peer pressure.

We took the doors off the van so we could jump out easily, which we had to do several times when low-flying helicopters—their spidery blades looking particularly menacing that morning—swept down on us. We had been relatively safe the last few days, scampering on the periphery of the conflict like energized pinballs. But now the Unseen was very near indeed, poised like a massive foot over our heads.

We drove through a string of deserted, derelict hamlets along a road edged with coconut trees and abandoned railroad tracks. The point of the morning's operation was to bolster defenses along the road, one of the last rebel-held access routes into Jaffna. The Tigers had been able to hold off the advancing Indian column with the help of land mines powerful enough to rip open the belly of a tank. The road, puddled from the rain the night before and illuminated by flat, hard light, seemed drained of all life-sustaining properties, airless and frozen. The unnatural quiet was maddening, given what undoubtedly lay just around the bend. Hillmore's deprecatory humor kept me distracted, however, and his heroic limp as we walked the last leg made me feel as though I were going into battle with Charlie Chaplin.

Bursts of machine-gun fire kept us low and alert. Hillmore seemed to have been inspired by the moment and, despite his limp, was up near the point man, who slithered across the road to connect a detonator wire to a mine in a culvert beneath the roadway. The maneuveur drew heavy fire, and we fell back, shaken, regrouping a half mile away in an abandoned rice mill that fronted an open paddy. Hillmore, however, unable to run, had stayed behind with the Tigers. The last I'd seen him, he'd backed himself up against the concrete wall of a shed and was lighting a cigarette, looking like a commuter waiting for a bus.

I was a little unhappy about leaving him out there—until the shells started to drop, obliterating everything but the thought of saving my own ass. When the first round

hit, blowing dirt by our ears, the guys and I looked at one another in disbelief, registering abject terror through open mouths and wide eyes, then took off behind a Tiger guerrilla who had been assigned the task of getting us out of harm's way.

"Move! Move! Move! Down! Down! Down!" he commands as the shells burst about us, seeming to follow our path, first one way, then another. For more than a mile, orders to run alternate with ones to take cover, and I lose all sense of time and direction. Every new round makes the knot inside my stomach explode, causing adrenaline to surge dizzily. The fear I have kept at bay now springs forth with additive force. Someone in our heaving, scrambling pack kicks me in the face, disorienting me further. When we retreat far enough, falling into the foundation of a half-built house, I push my sweat-soaked back up against the wall and take about half an hour to catch my breath and pick the gravel from my hands. Everyone has made it, except Hillmore, lost somewhere on the front line.

We wait in the house with some Tigers for about an hour as shells begin to drop along another line of fire. The guerrillas are hardly fazed. They seem to know where the shells will fall and how much time they have before they need to worry. What is terrifying for us is as predictable as a minuet to them—they even break for midmorning tea and spin an unexploded mortar shell like a top in the sand as we wait for the van to evacuate us, hoping that Hillmore might somehow already be in it. Having gone in with him, I feel responsible that he is now missing in action. But then again, it's not as if we can ask the Indians to organize a search party.

Just as we are about to give up on him, Hillmore arrives on the back of a motor scooter, his bulk incongruous next to the skinny frame of his guerrilla chauffeur. "Only way to see the country, really," he says triumphantly as we welcome him back into the fold of the living, and the rebels bring us coconuts to sip that were knocked down in the attack. "Funny little war," he mumbles cavalierly. Hillmore was close enough to "the enemy" to have heard the snortings of an armored personnel carrier and, unlike the rest of us, actually saw Indian soldiers—well, one Indian soldier, anyway, sprawled in a rice paddy. Nonetheless, Hillmore isn't taking any undue chances. "My God, are you mad?" he exclaims when one of the boys offers him a drink of well water. "You can die drinking that stuff."

During our desperate retreat, Hillmore, it seems, was lolling in a rice paddy with one of the Tigers, having a smoke and chatting about London, where the guerrilla had studied. "It's all a bit like being a tourist," he says quite happily. "You can almost set your watch by it. Six o'clock, coffee. Seven o'clock, refugees. Two o'clock, back to Colombo. I'll go tell the Indians that we've had enough for the day, thank you very much. Game over."

As we walk to the van, though, Hillmore's limp is much more pronounced—a sign that he has been affected far more than he is letting on. "I was after some pop-pop," he says with typical Oxbridge understatement, "but what I didn't expect was such heavy boom-boom." He looks down at the dirt he is picking out of his ears. "Bloody awful, shelling." ■

William McGowan, a New York writer, is currently working on a book about the war in Sri Lanka for Farrar, Straus & Giroux.