

From the headlines...

25 years ago The way we were

Contd. from Page 4

Aalaya while his wife's name was Himalaya. Things came to a head when an innocent question by a British journalist at a function held at the Oberoi found its way into this column. He asked whether the Prime Minister's wife's name was Magul Bera. When asked how he came to that conclusion, he replied that in all the local papers, it was reported that the Prime Minister inaugurated that seminar and opened this building "accompanied by Magul Bera".

President Premadasa's ire was raised when Suranimala reported that Sirisena Cooray refused to attend a meeting when President Premadasa asked him to help to work out the details of his new cabinet. Cooray, who knew of Premadasa's plans to give demoted ministries to Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, had said 'Anunge Beli Kapanna Mata Udaw Wenna Baa' (I cannot help cut the throats of others). Cooray then left in a helicopter to Devinuwara to attend a function at the Devinuwara Devalaya organised by Mahinda Wijesekera.

Premadasa had felt we were telling the nation that there was a wedge between Cooray and him. He began to attack publisher Ranjit Wijewardene and me in public starting from the Gangaramaya. I received a message from the publisher, who was in Britain, asking me to stop the column. I felt this was interference in the editorial independence and preferred to resign. I was annoyed because this was the first time in five years that there was interference in my judgement as an editor. I preferred to be remembered as an editor who upheld the best traditions of journalism rather than as an editor who continued in office and drew a salary for the sake of it.

A major scoop for the Sunday Times was the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka. It was a closely guarded secret but my immediate neighbour, a senior cabinet minister, told me about it 48 hours earlier. We immediately rushed Tyronne Devotta and photographer Pushpakumara Matugama to Jaffna. They were the only journalists from Colombo who were there when the Indians arrived. The report and photos were exclusive and a scoop. They were used even by agencies and newspapers overseas.

Many were the journalists who rose to fame because of their work at the Sunday Times. Among them are Lalith Alahakoon, News Editor, who went on to become the first editor of the Daily Mirror, Nation and now Ceylon Today, Kendall Hopman, Deputy News Editor, who started Sri Lanka's first dedicated PR agency, Keith Noyahr, who joined us from the YMCA where he was the librarian, and J.S. Tissanayagam who joined us straight from the university and



Popular film star Dilhani Abeywardene poses with a copy of the Sunday Times as the paper rolled out of the Web, our first printing machine



who went through a baptism of fire and is now in the United States.

It is difficult to mention all the names of those who worked during those formative years to make the Sunday Times the most-read newspaper. But the contribution of each one is appreciated, not forgetting those in the advertising, circulation and the printing departments.

The Sunday Times has gone through a baptism of fire on a number of occasions but will be remembered most for the long drawn out criminal defamation case of President Chandrika Kumaratunga against the editor, Sinha Ratnatunga, who succeeded me. The detailed story of that is now chronicled in the book *The Other War* by Dr Rajiv

Weerasundera.

Twenty-five years on, my favourite story is about Qadri Ismail, another colourful character who worked at the Newspaper. While on assignment for the Sunday Times, he was shot at by a sniper in an IPKF aircraft and was lucky to survive. It was days before we got any news of him.

Qadri is now Assistant Professor of English at Minnesota University in the US. He was once involved in an argument about English with his former English Professor Ashley Halpe of the Peradeniya University. The controversy raged in Mervyn de Silva's Guardian magazine. Finally the learned professor chose to end the interesting exchange with a one-liner. He said, tongue in cheek, "Earlier we had English with a smile; now we have English with an Ismail". Qadri is now Assistant Professor of English at Minnesota University in the US.

Publisher's note: I do not have a recollection of asking that the Suranimala column be withdrawn, but Mr. Yapa might well believe that to be a convenient lapse of memory on my part. The column did continue as one of the Sunday Times' most read commentaries, after Mr. Yapa's resignation and with that continuance, the experience of many anxious days and restless nights.



We will reveal all: The then team SundayTimes promoting the paper at the CR & FC grounds

