

THE BATTLE OF COLACHEL – 10 AUGUST, 1741

King Marthanda Varma, the ruler of the tiny Southern Indian state of Venad, crossed swords with the Dutch, the dominant European power trying to colonize India in early 1740s when the Dutch East India Company tried to interfere with the King's plans to integrate the smaller kingdoms in the area to his own to form a larger domain that was to become Travancore. A force of Dutch marines commanded by Capt Eustache Benoit de Lannoy landed at Colachel, a coastal town near Kanyakumari in late July 1741 and attempted to capture Padmanabhapuram, the capital of Marthanda Varma, to the north. It was met in battle by the Travancore Army – then called 'Nair Pattalam' – which rushed to the scene from Trivandrum, on 10 August 1741. The Dutch were soundly defeated by the Travancoreans who killed or captured a large number of them.

Among the Dutch taken prisoner were 24 officers including their commander, De Lannoy. Most of the prisoners including De Lannoy, took up service under the Maharaja of Travancore. Tasked with training the Travancore Army on modern European lines, De Lannoy accomplished the same with great distinction, transforming it into a highly competent fighting force. It went on to conquer the whole of what is southern Kerala today, in the bargain ousting De Lannoy's former employers, the Dutch East India Company, from their entire holdings on the Malabar Coast thereby putting an end to their imperialistic dream in India.

De Lannoy rose to become the Commander-in-Chief of the Travancore Army and passed away in 1777 while living in Udayagiri Fort, highly honoured with the nom de guerre 'Valiya Kappittan' or the 'Great Captain'. The army he trained was to achieve a historic victory in another twelve years when it stopped the invading Mysore forces of Tipu Sultan on their tracks in the Battle of Nedumkotta fought on 28 December 1789, which left Tipu lamed for life when he fell off his palanquin.

Though the Travancore Army itself was disbanded in later years after its failed revolt against the British under Velu Thampi Dalawa in 1809, the nuclear force that formed its line-up at Colachel – raised in 1704 by one of Marthanda Varma's ancestors – survived the colonial era as the Maharaja's Bodyguard and, on disbandment of the State Forces after Indian Independence, was amalgamated with the Madras Regiment of the Indian Army as its 9th Battalion, according it the proud distinction of being the oldest surviving military unit in India.