

The Great Marshal

Tribute from a Naval Aviator



Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh sadly passed away on the 16 September at the age of 98 years. One felt sad because being a Naval Aviator, we also have always had very close association with the IAF, like that of an extended family. The Marshal was a legend in his lifetime for every aviator irrespective of his colour of uniform. He had retired in 1969, but not before he had become an inspiration for many school children who recall the 1965 war of India with Pakistan. My own mind clock went back 52 years to September 1965.

Many of us who lived close to the Indo-Pak border witnessed shades of the 1965 war with Pakistan. There was much action on the Western Front but the Eastern front was no less tense. There was no electronic media those days, in fact our own village did not even have electricity. 40+ kilometres

from Bagdogra IAF base very close to Taibpur NDB, our village Thakurganj was vulnerable to air strikes by PAF from East Pakistan air bases. The civil air defence was active throughout the bordering districts. Being close to two important air bases, i.e. Kalaikunda and Bagdogra, very often the ear-penetrating siren sounds would mean that we laid down wherever we were : but there was no black out at nights since there was no electricity !

There being no electronic media and extremely meagre access to print media, the radio was only source of information. There was general belief that BBC's Hindi Service would be first to report of war news impartially. Elders and younger ones in the village would huddle around radios sets and the tension would mount in an atmosphere of pin drop silence. There were often mention of action on the Western

borders but not so much of the East where we were supposedly also vulnerable. One would often hear names of Gen JN Choudhury, the Army Chief and (then) Air Marshal Arjan Singh, Chief of the Air Staff. Their statements, that our warriors had the wherewithal needed to beat Pakistan forces if they tried any misadventure, was cause for cheer amongst us listeners.

It was the second week September 1965 that the news of both Air Forces attacking each other's airfields in the eastern sector came about. We heard about Sabre jets and our own Canberra bombers, Hunters and Folland Gnats participating in action. As BBC's Hindi service reported, both Air Forces surprised each other by ground attacks and flew some counter chase by fighters. One recalls that the siren went off one evening while we were at the school football field. We automatically dropped