

Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha recalls

The Legendary John Farley

- and the Indian Navy's Legendary Sea Harriers

It was 1972 and we were Midshipmen under flying training with the IAF. Having “survived” the basic and intermediate stages, we were on the last stage at Fighter Training Wing, AFS Hakimpet. ‘Lead-in-fighter training’ in the IAF was going through critical times, with depleting numbers of Vampire trainers and its replacement not yet finalised. Even before we arrived at Hakimpet we knew that ours would possibly be the last course to train on the venerable Vampire.

We were six Midshipmen and our leader of Naval pilots was a dashing young Lieutenant ‘Raju’ Sethi. There were numerous rumours floating around as to how the Navy would soon be without a carrier-borne fighter in the foreseeable future. The Sea Hawks were on their last legs post-1971 war, having done outstandingly well to ensure blockade off the erstwhile East Bengal and hastening surrender of the Pakistan Army.

That there was no fighter replacement for the Sea Hawk was extremely discouraging to us, the Naval Aviators of No.112 Flying Pilots Course, particularly when all 7 pilots were being trained for the fighter stream. Then we learnt of the visit of the DASD, Captain Ram Tahiliani (later Chief of the Naval Staff) to FTW. One had heard a great deal about him (nicknamed ‘Tally Ho !’) as having been the first Indian Navy pilot to land a Sea Hawk on the INS *Vikrant*. He was a Flying Instructor and Test Pilot trained in France. We were looking forward to meeting him, essentially to ascertain what awaited our return to the Navy after we had earned our ‘golden wings’.

It was during conversations with him that I had first heard of John Farley, the context being that John Farley had done a demonstration deck landing of the VTOL Harrier onboard INS *Vikrant* in July 1972. Incidentally, this was the first ever deck operation of the Harrier anywhere in the world. John had also flown Capt Tahiliani



John Farley with Shekhar Sinha and Arun Prakash

in the two seater demonstrator (G-VTOL). He was then Deputy Chief Test Pilot of Hawker Siddeley Aviation facility at Dunsfold. We were assured by him that the Indian Naval fighter stream had “great future”, with replacement of the Sea Hawk being “round the corner”.

After earning our wings we joined INAS 551 based at Goa in December 1974. The

operational Sea Hawk Squadron INAS 300 ‘White Tigers’ next door to be was our next step, though they had very few aircraft left in their inventory. We, in 551, were the first batch to fly HAL-built Kiran Mk.1s but there were two Vampires T.55s as well. Having flown Vampires at Hakimpet, we were reasonably current and would fly them as and when they came on the flight line.