

Unwritten History

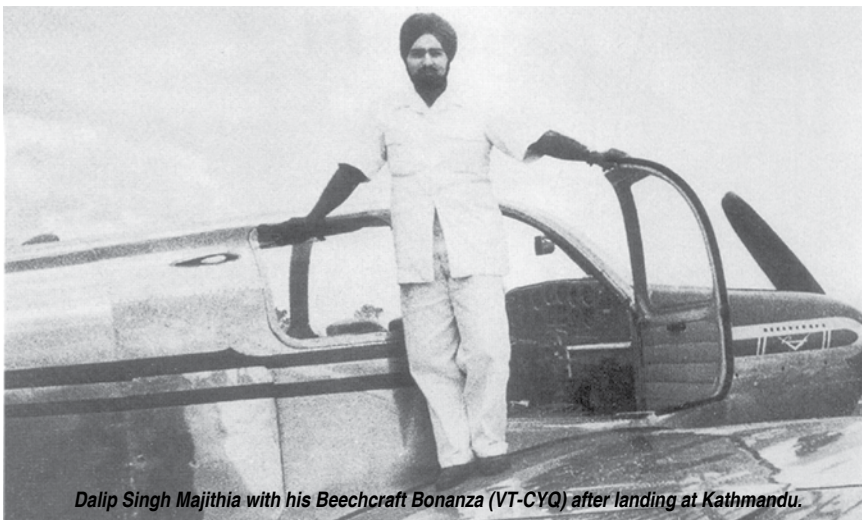
First Aircraft Landing at Kathmandu



Kaiser Shamsher Rana with colleague and the Bonanza, after the first landing at Kathmandu on 23 April 1949.



April 2010: As per the Aeronautical Information Service, there is immense congestion of flights into Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport, with 25 international airlines operating 35 flights a day plus eight domestic airline and five helicopter operators using the airport. There remains just one runway which aggravates the air traffic congestion as most airlines prefer the 10am-5pm time slot, largely because Nepal's terrain makes flying at night dangerous (Contemporary map of Kathmandu on the right).



Dalip Singh Majithia with his Beechcraft Bonanza (VT-CYQ) after landing at Kathmandu.

But 61 years earlier, on 23 April 1949, Kathmandu, capital of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal, witnessed the first ever landing by an aircraft on an improvised runway, which was in fact a parade ground, rectangular in shape 150 yards x 1200 yards, north to south. Pilot of the aircraft was the intrepid Sqn Ldr Dalip Singh Majithia who, as a Flight Lieutenant in the nascent IAF, had commanded a flight of Hurricanes based at Miranshah in the north-west frontier area in 1944. Later, he became CO of No.4 Squadron with Hurricane IIs during the Burma campaign. Owing to exigencies of family business, he left the Royal Indian Air Force in August 1947 and moved to

Gorakhpur where the Majithia family had large land holdings. Shortly thereafter, he relocated to Muzaffarpur in northern Bihar where also the first aircraft of the family were acquired, two L-5 light utility aircraft, followed by Beechcraft Bonanza cabin monoplanes. Dalip's passion for aviation was soon to be manifested by the historic pioneering feat when he landed the very first aircraft in the Kathmandu valley. Deep interest in opening up Nepal for civil aviation and air transportation of perishables had been evinced by Mohan Shamsheer then Prime Minister of Nepal who wrote to the Indian Ambassador thus:

"I have been wondering if it would be possible to make use of small transport planes to carry paddy to Kathmandu valley after the rains, knowing that Dakotas require a landing ground which would be difficult to get ready. I shall be much obliged if you could give me your opinion on the matter and, if the proposal is feasible, could you kindly prepare and send me a scheme showing the arrangements that are needed, as well as the quantity that can be carried, the cost, and other necessary information." Credit for the pioneering flight thus equally goes to Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia, Dalip's uncle (and later Deputy Defence Minister of India) who was then India's Ambassador to Nepal. Surjit Singh Majithia had himself earlier served in the Indian Air Force and commanded No.2 Squadron. He inspired and encouraged the young Dalip to undertake this flight



Young Dalip at Karachi Flying Club with Gypsy Moth in June 1940 before joining the Indian Air Force.

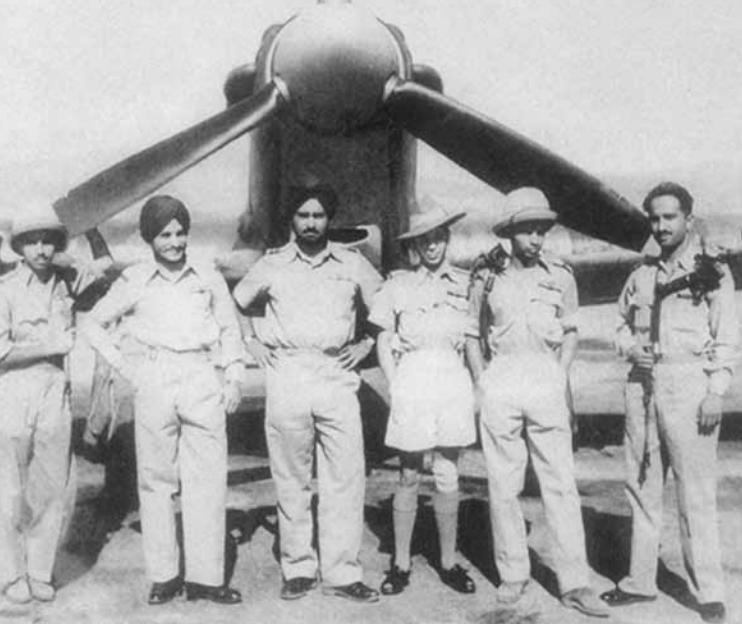
and provided him with essential details of the landing ground and environment. In a letter from Kathmandu to his nephew, dated 7 June 1948, Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia wrote: "This (Kathmandu) is

a bigish city right in the centre of the Valley. You can see the big white houses which are enclosed in high walls and are the palaces of the Ranas".

"In the centre again you find a parade ground which is rectangular in shape. This is about 150 yards by 1000 or 1200 yards long. The length is north to south. On the north of this there is a lake with a mandir at its centre. There is a clock tower towards the east of this lake. There is a lone tar-metalled road starting a little beyond the south of this parade ground which runs due north and terminates in the Embassy area. The other metalled road branches off at right angles to this towards the west for a distance of about 3 furlongs or 500 to 600 yards and ends up in a square where you have the official Durbar Hall of His Majesty and a couple of temples. To the east of this parade ground and southwards you have a very big building, the largest in Nepal which is the Prime Minister's residence. From here you fly due east for a mile and half and you will come across a small river flowing north - south for a short distance and passing through a gorge

King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal with Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia, and Dalip Singh Majithia on 23 April 1949.





Dalip Singh Majithia as detachment commander of a Hurricane Flight at Miranshah Fort in the NWFP, 1944. (L to R are F/O AR David, F/O Randhir Singh, F/Lt. DS Majithia, F/O M De Sa, F/O PB Pawar and F/O Akhtar Khan).

between two hills. Along the banks you have the famous Pashupathinath Temple. The eastern hill is wooded. Where the woods end you will have a clear place running north—south. This will be the landing ground. My car will be there, alongside which I will be standing facing the wind, but you have to land from south to north. There is a slight slope from the north coming down towards the south.”

In his letter, dated 16 June 1948, Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia continues to describe arrangements being made to facilitate the first air landing at Kathmandu, sans proper runway. “I have carefully marked the landing ground on the map where I propose to put a circle in ink (which) you will find due east of Kathmandu and alongside the temple of Pashupathinath. It is marked on the map, on the foot of the ‘K’ for Kathmandu. I have also marked a cross on the west of the town which you will notice. The intention is to have the parade ground smoothed out to give a run of 600 yards or so into the prevailing wind which is from west to east. In case there is no wind, then I will have a T put out on the parade ground which is in the middle of the city and a big one. Naturally if the wind is strong, then I will have the T facing west in which case you will not land at the former landing place but at the other one. In the absence of any T at the parade ground at Kathmandu, you will land east of the town. But let me know approximately when you plan to fly in as I will arrange to have the landing ground cleared of any grazing cattle - this happens to be a grazing ground!”

“Coming into Nepal, I don’t think you will have to climb very high because if you check on your route from Muzaffarpur to this place straight, you practically come along the river Bhagmati and enter the valley along the river and you fly in between the high mountains, 8,297 ft on one side and a little over 9,000 ft on the other, and so if you come in between these two ranges and follow the course of the river, you will arrive over Kathmandu without any high mountains on your flight path.”

On 23 June 1948, further details were given about the ground preparations for the landing. “After all”, writes Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia, “the work of levelling the landing strip is going to start. You must have received the map on which I had marked the position of the landing strip. I will have a T next to my car giving you the direction to land whereas my car will be facing into the wind. At the bottom edge of the T, you will find a circular ball if the wind speed is five miles or less, two balls if it is between five and 15 miles per hour and three if it is more than 15 miles per hour. That will be enough guidance regarding the direction and strength of the wind. If the wind is very strong and I feel

that it is not safe to land, there will be an X instead of a T near my car.”

“I remember we had a transmitter and receiver in our L-5s. Please let me know if they are working, and the wave length on which your transmitter is tuned. In that case, I will have my transmitter out on the landing ground and will be able to communicate with you as soon as I know you can hear me.”

The pioneering flight into Kathmandu was accomplished with ease and the élan of an experienced and enthusiastic former IAF fighter pilot, with accolades and appreciation then coming from the Prime Minister of Nepal. “It was a pleasure to see this afternoon the first aeroplane landing in Kathmandu and I feel that I must congratulate your Excellency for arranging this flight and also Sardar Dalip Singh Majithia for the smooth landing he made over here”, wrote the Prime Minister of Nepal to India’s Ambassador. Expressing his ‘sincere thanks’ to Sqn Ldr Dalip Singh Majithia, the Ambassador’s nephew, he added: “As a recognition of the services thus rendered to Nepal I should like, if your Excellency has no objection, to confer upon Sardar Dalip Singh Majithia the decoration of *Pradipta Manyabar Nepal Tura*”.

Six decades later, Sqn Ldr Dalip Singh Majithia, now ninety-plus, reminisces about this monumental flight and revives for his friends and well wishers, a chapter of aviation history that was never written. But it is never too late!

JCM



Portrait of the Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, DFC unveiled at the ‘Hardinge Room, 1911’ on 20 March 2010. (Left to right) Veteran aviator Dalip Singh Majithia, Air Marshal PK Barbora (VCAS), Mrs Arjan Singh, Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, Mrs Joan Majithia and Air Chief Marshal Pradeep Naik, Chief of Air Staff.