



## Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker on VISTAK at Hakimpet

The Indian Air Force (IAF) and I share the same year of birth – 1932. With the passage of time I find myself (temporarily) the oldest living ex-Commandant of the Air Force Academy (1983-85) and similarly, the oldest ex-Base Commander of Air Force Station Hakimpet (1975-77). Both are co-located with this long retired (1986) air veteran and neither ever fail to extend an invitation to the annual Air Force Day functions; 2016 was no exception. On the wet evening of 8 October 2016, accompanied by my successor and our wives, I found myself night-driving carefully to Hakimpet, the closer of the two establishments. We received a warm welcome from the AOC and much appreciated the valet parking service provided to all the air veteran guests. Climbing stairs at the age of 84, one has to now be particularly cautious, but there was no shortage of young helping hands to steady our entry into the Officers Mess I had built 40 years ago.

While catching up with old friends and enjoying the hospitality and entertainment, my wife brought over a young lady officer of the technical branch of the IAF no older than our granddaughter. She had apparently read my articles, and requested my wife to

introduce her. Observing the hearing-aids in both my ears, she thoughtfully spoke slowly and clearly above the rising noise of the party. She expressed her interest in the meaning and origin of the word ‘VISTAK,’ which had just been projected on the screen, and wanted to know my “experiences at Hakimpet.” I explained that VISTAK was only an acronym I had created in 1976 from the initial capital letters of the six aircraft that had till then been based at Hakimpet, i.e. Vampire, Iskra, Spitfire, Tempest, Alouette (Chetak) and Kiran, but not in their actual chronological sequence. In 1951 the IAF had taken over Hakimpet airfield to base the Conversion Training Unit (CTU), re-located from Ambala. As a newly commissioned Pilot Officer I was posted here in 1952 to undergo my fighter conversion on Spitfire and Tempest aircraft, one of which I had to bale out from, owing to a fire in the air. In the late 1950s, as a Flt Lt QFI, I had a brief tenure instructing on the Vampire as at JTW / FTW Hakimpet.

In 1975, as Group Captain, I was posted to command the station. My two-and-a-half year tenure included induction of the Polish Iskra trainer into the IAF. We were responsible for Phase II flying training on both Iskra and Kiran aircraft

simultaneously, while Helicopter Training School (HTS) provided rotary wing training on Alouette (Chetak) helicopters. We actually had 84 aircraft in our Hakimpet hangars, comprising 50 Iskra, 24 Kirans and 10 Chetaks. I was able to do my helicopter conversion with HTS and led the first 12 Iskras to Jamnagar and back (via Nasik) so that our pilot trainees were able to carry out live firing practice at Sarmat Range, as well as their navigation sorties. Our ancient World War II vintage cinema hall (and only meeting place for the station) was given a facelift and named ‘Vistak’. In 2005 (in retirement) I was invited to the decommissioning of the Iskra after 30 years of service at Hakimpet. I wonder how many IAF officers have had the experience of witnessing the phase-out ceremony of an ac they had inducted?

I concluded the potted history of my links with Hakimpet by pointing out to the young lady that, despite the passage of a near half-century, the last two aircraft comprising ‘Vistak’ (Alouette/Chetak and Kiran) still continue to provide flying training at Hakimpet.

This admirable feat by man and machine calls for a salute from the oldest member of ‘Team Vistak.’!



Vampire



Iskra



Spitfire



Tempest



Alouette (Chetak)



Kiran