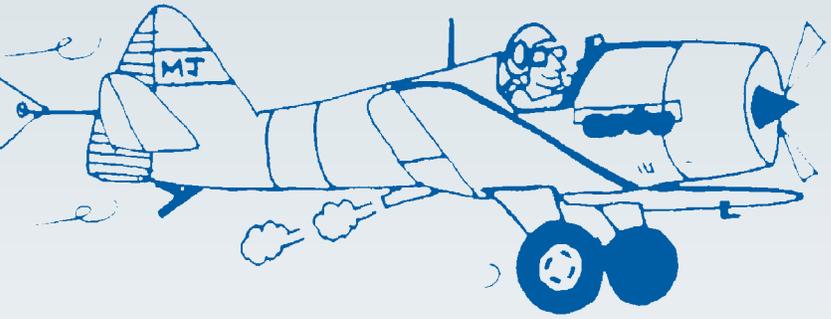


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



For Pete's Sake

Early on New Year's Day we received the sad news of the passing away of 88 year-old Air Commodore PM Wilson, VrC on 28 December 2015 in the UK. Pete, as he was known to more than a generation of the Indian Air Force, received a spate of tributes from his long list of friends and admirers. Few are legends in their own time and this unassuming, straight forward officer, gentleman and pilot par excellence, was certainly one. A natural flier and strategic thinker in the employment of air power, Pete was also blessed with the rare gifts of both common and uncommon sense. Tall and fair, his hooded eyes seldom missed anything in the air or on the ground. His laconic speech

was frequently laced with an understated sense of humour. Five years my senior, he was for me, instructor, guide, mentor and friend.

Our relationship dates back to 1951 when, as a flight cadet at the Basic Stage of pilot training on the Tiger Moth, Fg Offr Pete Wilson took me up for my very first sortie of low flying. This was an experience I still recall vividly 65 years later! He was a pioneer Canberra pilot, an aircraft he swore by. In 1968, on promotion to group captain, he came and took over the air base at Jamnagar where I had raised our air force's first Hunter Operational Training Unit, which I was in command of, as a Wing Commander.

On one occasion, when a Canberra from his old squadron landed, he hijacked it, put me in the navigator's cockpit and flew low level over the Arabian Sea teaching me how to calculate drift! Thereafter I had the embarrassment of converting him on to the Hunter. I soon realised that within a few sorties he was handling the aircraft with greater skill than I, despite my extensive type experience! We both flew the Marut and Gnat for the first time. He flew the Hunter regularly and my flying instructors and I learned a great deal from this very experienced aviator who just loved flying. At my farewell party he finally admitted that the Canberra was the "second-best aircraft" he had ever flown!



Indian Air Force Hawker Hunter Mk. 56



Indian Air Force Canberra Mk. 66

Learning from Pete was not restricted only to the medium of the air. I recollect one occasion after the 1971 Indo Pak war when Pete was at the NDC and I had come to Delhi from Pathankot for my investiture. He called to congratulate me and asked me over for dinner as he was keen to learn about all the counter air sorties I had flown. While recounting my experience, I included some unflattering comments about the leadership of my air base. Pete listened patiently and responded thus: “when you work under effective seniors, observe them and learn what to do. If you work under ineffective ones, observe them and learn what not to do!” A typically cryptic example of ‘Peters Principle’ if you will. Pete’s own professionalism as a pilot had been demonstrated in the 1965 Indo-Pak war, when he was awarded the VrC, and again as an air base commander in the 1971 war. In the mid-1970s he left the air force and migrated to the UK.

We continued to keep in touch. In 1980, while I was attending the RCDS in London, Pete was with Scotland Yard. We were both within walking distance of St. James’ Park and met there frequently for an open air lunch on a park bench with sandwiches from the Wilson household and beer from the pub behind my college. We communicated more freely than when he was in uniform but I could sense that he had his heart in the world of military aviation he had left behind. Just a few weeks before he passed away I was in London and on the phone with him. Partly because of my own hearing disability, I could not clearly decipher his slurred speech. Mildred, his wife who was monitoring our conversation, interpreted his message thus: “tell him he is a good pilot and that I enjoy his articles.” No *shishya* could possibly ask for more from his *guru*. So this one is for you Pete: RIP

shaadi20@iaf.com

The reader is advised not to try and log on to the title website as it does not exist. In fact it never existed and is merely commemorative of a marital alliance that took place in No. 20 Squadron of the Indian Air Force long before advent of the internet. The wedding was solemnised soon after the 1971 Indo Pak war when the unit (of which I was in command) was based in Pathankot. The marriage is recalled because it generated an intriguing consequence which continues to remain a co-incidental possibility even today.

After distinguishing itself in the war, the squadron was in a relaxed build-up phase with a large number of personnel availing well earned leave. Among my officers was a tall young pilot from Kodagu automatically nicknamed ‘Lofty’. He was a cheerful, active type whose spontaneous laughter was audible above the noise of a jet engine! He had earned himself a Vir Chakra gallantry award and came to see me with an application for some leave and permission to get married.

Lofty explained that his bride-to-be was from the north-east and, owing to distance, location and other commitments, families from neither side could be present. Since the marriage ceremony could not be held in the Officers Mess, he made a personal request for it to be conducted in my residence with the CO and his wife to kindly play the part of the bride’s parents. We were happy and privileged to do so; a pandit was organised, all other arrangements made with the squadron officers forming the *baraat*. Just before the wedding day I was called urgently to HQ WAC in Delhi so my Flight Commander took over as ‘father-of-the-bride’. I missed this unique marital union of a Coorgi lad

from the deep south with a Khasi lass from the far east performed in the extremities of our western border!

I returned with the news that our Squadron had been tasked to operate a detachment of Hunter aircraft from Srinagar for the very first time. I carried out the trial flights for operations from a high altitude base. (In the course of these trials I experienced ‘aquaplaning’ for the first and only time - but that is another story). We moved six aircraft, technical tradesmen, pilots, support staff, ground equipment and families to Srinagar where many of us shared houseboats on the Jhelum river. Ali, the young son of our houseboat owner, was a helpful lad with a fund of tales to relate and entertain us. Our newly married couple was thus gifted with a honeymoon in Kashmir. On a squadron boat ride on the river, our new bride was showing one of her wedding gifts – a water proof watch – to the ladies when one of the children dropped it overboard to her consternation; we rallied around with appropriate support.

In 1985–86 while I was AOC J&K, at a social function I met a foreign tourist couple who happened to be staying in the very same houseboat we had occupied in 1972. They were full of praise for the service of Ali (now the owner) and fascinated with his many stories. He had told them that many years earlier, a trout (caught in the upper reaches of the Jhelum) when cut open, revealed a watch inside! I made no comment but my memory circuit stirred to life and I began to wonder.... Fishy story? Probably, but if the erstwhile bride (now a grandmother) reads this anecdote, she may like to e-mail Ali (muchh_ali420@gmail.com) and check if it was a ladies watch!

Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker