

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker (retd) continues to recall

From the log book

On reporting to the Air Force Academy in 1951, one of the first documents handed to each of us Flight Cadets, was a blank IAF F(AO) – 1266 soon to be familiarly known to us as the Pilots Log Book. Recent research for an article made me unearth my own. Most fliers carefully preserve this verified record of every single sortie flown. (For the uninitiated, a 'sortie' is the time in the air from initial take-off to full-stop landing). Normally the number of take-offs should equal the number of landings but in rare cases, there can be a difference. For example, on 28 October 1952 I took off in Tempest IIA (HA596) but 15 minutes later I had to bail out due to fire in the air and reached the ground by parachute. The detailed record in the log book is comprehensive covering as it does date, aircraft (ac) type / number, whether Pilot / Captain or 2nd Pilot / Pupil, duty (i.e. actual exercise carried out), flight time in single / multi – engine ac, day or night or solo.

To the recorded data, most pilots endorse commemorative/significant occurrences against specific sorties, e.g. accidents, awards, war sorties and photographs. To illustrate: I have photographs of the very first Indian lady (an air force medical officer) to fly in a jet combat ac when I took her up in Hunter T.66D BA575 on 12 June 1970 for an air experience sortie. Another is of Hunter 56 A485 which brought me back safely from the very first sunrise gun-strike on the PAF air base at Peshawar on 4 December 1971 despite 22 bullet hits on its fuselage. Yet another is that of the Iskra trainer aircraft which I inducted into our air force in 1975. No two sorties are ever quite the same as a pilot is always on a learning curve due to the experience he/she gains in each sortie and applies in the next one. Quite a few sorties are linked with special incidents and perhaps some have stories that will never be told.....

As I went down memory lane, my log book reminded me that, as Captain/1st Pilot, I had flown the Tiger Moth, Harvard, Spitfire, Tempest, Vampire, Toofani, HT-2, Prentice, Devon, Dakota, Hunter, T-39 Sabreliner, Marut, Gnat, Kiran, Iskra, Chetak and MiG series. As a 2nd Pilot / Pupil, I had flown the BAe Hawk in the UK, RAF Harrier T.4 in Germany, USAF F-100 Sabre (*Ex Shiksha*) and our own Jaguar just before I left the Air Force in 1986. For the record, these added up to 22 aircraft types and 4261 flying hours of which 43% was on one aircraft type (the Hunter, which I flew



Hawker Tempest IIA

Dassault Ouragan (Toofani)

Hawker Hunter Mk.56A

MiG-21M

continuously for 10 years) and 22 % was instructional as a QFI. I was also reminded that, outside India, I had taken off and landed on eight US airfields, four British and one each in France, Malta, Cyprus, Bahrain and Pakistan (yes, Karachi on 30 September 1969 ferrying Hunter 56A BA969 from UK to India and I believe the very first IAF Hunter to do so).

Mine was the generation that in 1952 transited from piston-engined ac to jet aircraft and that too without the benefit of a trainer as the Vampire T 55 arrived long after we had been launched solo in the Vampire FB52. Perhaps the one sortie that gave me great joy cannot unfortunately be recorded in my log book. A decade after leaving the air force, and in my mid - 60s, I was invited to fly a sortie in a twin-seat microlight aircraft of the Harare Aero Club in Zimbabwe. It was great to be back in the air and, for a while, handling familiar controls in manual flying similar to the Tiger Moth where it all started! For an 'octopilot' his log book serves as a delightful memory box of the years spent in the air.

A PK from the past

Amir Khan's PK came from outer space; the PK of this story came from Kerala and I met him at an air force base. Unlike the saga of our Bollywood hero however, his is a story of the often unsung ground services provided by support personnel whose skills ensure effective air operations in the Indian Air Force (IAF).

On 1 October, 1966, as a brand new wing commander, I stood alone in an empty aircraft hangar at Air Force Station Jamnagar, contemplating my task of raising and commanding the IAF's first Operational Training Unit (OTU) with Hunters. A young corporal dismounted from his cycle, saluted and asked me as to where he could find the OTU. He gave his name as PK Soman, trade as Clk GD and was reporting on posting. I told him he had found OTU, introduced myself, bundled him into my jeep, and together we raided the station stationery stores where we begged, borrowed and stole a typewriter, stationery items and anything else we could lay our hands on. Back in the hangar, he helped me move three crates into the only room with a telephone, a big one for a table and two smaller ones for chairs as there was no furniture. Thus the HQ of OTU was established and a friendship now in its 50th year commenced.

In the next few weeks 20 Hunters, 28 officers, 380 airmen, families, ground equipment plus 16 trainee officers arrived and extensive flying commenced. Through all the initial interdependent activities of creating a new unit, PK was my Man Friday and right hand in setting up our own orderly room. He was virtually my SO, Adjutant and PA all combined till the posted incumbents reported. Through our professional relationship, a personal friendship developed. It was from him that I learnt about the significance of Onam which, along with all our other festivals, our unit celebrated. Unknown to him, I included his name in a list I recommended for a Commendation. However, my laudatory report on him resulted in his being whisked off on posting as PA to an air officer who kept him on his personal staff for a decade! We kept in touch and PK left the IAF in 1978 from HQ TC IAF Bengaluru. He joined the clerical cadre of the National Petroleum Construction Company in the UAE and independently opened a new office for them in Saudi Arabia before returning to Abu Dhabi. (I would like to think that his experience in OTU helped!). After I left the IAF myself in 1986, I travelled regularly to the UAE and met up again with him. Sometime after his return to Kerala in 1999, my wife and I were in Munnar on holiday; Soman and family took the trouble of driving from his home in Alapuzza to meet us in Kochi for lunch.

PK Soman is now a happily retired grandfather and, in the past near half century, I cannot recall a year when we did not exchange greetings cards for Christmas and Onam! Next year, when OTU (now at another base and operating another type of aircraft) celebrates its Golden Jubilee on 1 October 2016, I trust that the then Commanding Officer will invite 71-year old No 259696 ex-Sgt PK Soman to the celebration as a founder member of the unit. This PK from the past can be reached at 098472 46275.

"He doesn't want glory – but please tell his story;

Spread a little of his fame around.

He's one of a few, so give him his due,

Three cheers for the man on the ground"

From: 'Ground Force' by LH Day

In clement days

In my student days, I was introduced to PG Wodehouse and of all the colourful cast of characters created by him, Jeeves was always my favourite. I did not know that in later years I was destined to meet a *desi* version of this 'gentleman's gentleman'. 63 years ago, on my very first squadron posting, I checked into the Officers Mess and shared the services of the room bearer with another bachelor officer. Clement, who was about my own age, was industrious, trustworthy and efficient. He not only looked after all our housekeeping needs and kept in safe custody our (very modest) salaries but in dire (financial) emergencies, even made a temporary 'loan' to his young masters who were generally insolvent long before the next pay day! He had some basic education, was a keen learner and had a flair for languages.

Our personal relationship bonded and, when my next posting came, I had no hesitation in agreeing to take him along. Clement thus entered my sole personal service and moved with me to various air bases, all up north. On a short visit to my parents in Kolkata, he accompanied me as he had never seen that city. As our own family retainer was himself on leave at that time, my mother was delighted with his culinary skills of which I knew nothing. He even picked up a smattering of Bengali to add to his communicative skills in Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi and English! Once, when I was briefly hospitalised in a remote Military Hospital and knew no one there, the matron surprised me by announcing a visitor. In

walked a smartly dressed Clement, sporting one of my squadron ties and having ridden up on my motor cycle to visit me!

When I got married and while serving at a desert air base, my more senior and experienced colleagues cautioned me that bachelor-days Jeeves never survived post-marriage. On the other hand, my bride whose (then) sole culinary attributes comprised possession of a recipe book and a can opener, was more than relieved to have his experience in the kitchen and even suggested that we return the hospitality of my boss and his wife by asking them over for the very first meal we ever hosted. Just before dinner was to be served, Clement walked in and in a loud voice announced "Madam, fly has fallen in soup" which resulted in great activity behind closed doors! After serving dessert, he once again announced that 'there is no more French toast' to prevent anyone requesting a refill! Our guests laughed heartily at Clement's demonstration of the triumph of Trust over Tact!

Our landlord who lived upstairs had a young pahari maid who looked after his little daughters. Perhaps motivated by my change of marital status, Clement fell madly in love with the young lady upstairs who apparently reciprocated his ardour. Despite opposition from both families (plus the landlord) we were supportive and happy to see this unique Malayali-Himachali union take place when such nuptials were rare. On our next posting up north however, Clement requested me for help to relocate south where he felt he could better his prospects. I was more than happy to assist him financially and, with the help of good friends, admit him into a polytechnic down south for technical training.

Many years later I was in a staff car driving up to Wellington where I was posted when, at a traffic stop-light, a vaguely familiar face on a motor cycle pulled up, gestured to me and requested the driver to pull over. A very prosperous looking Clement (re)introduced himself and said he had been trying to catch up ever since he saw me emerge from Coimbatore airport. At the closest restaurant, we sat together and caught up with family news from both sides. He was now an Assistant Manager in a manufacturing company, had a son and daughter both of whom were in college and he added proudly that his wife and children were all trilingual. I doubt if the original Jeeves could have done any better!