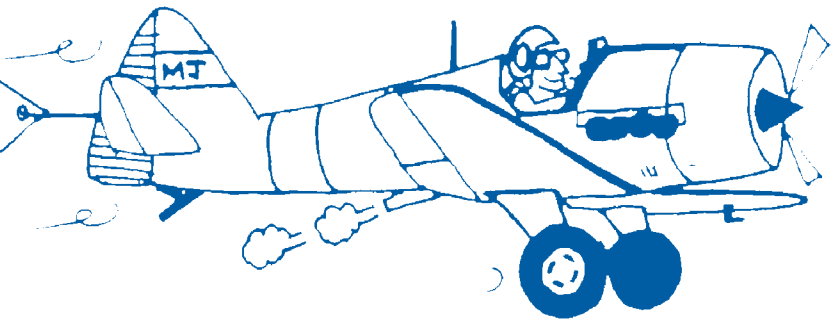


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



A Pilot's Profile in Numbers

or

"How To Cover 35 ½ Years in 480 Words"



Hawker Hunter F6 of the RAF, the Mark adopted by the IAF

Both the Indian Air Force and he were born in 1932, six weeks apart. In early 1951 he joined 50 other aspiring flight cadets who formed No. 58 Pilots Course at No. 1 AFA. After 18 months of flying training he was one of the 30 who earned their wings and were commissioned into the flying branch in 1952. As a Pilot Officer he was allotted service number 4346 and, along with 13 of his course mates, was posted to the CTU for fighter conversion. This was the first of his 20 postings in the next 34 years. After serving in eight ranks, he took premature retirement in 1986.

As a bachelor officer (1952-56), he had five postings in four years, and as a married one he moved on postings 15 times in 30 years. Of his 20 postings, seven were to staff/non-flying assignments, covering a collective total of 10 years. The other 24 years were spent in flying and command appointments on 12 air bases, of which nine were in Western Air Command and three in Training Command. He served in three fighter squadrons: Nos. 7, 3 and 20.

He raised and commanded two new units for the IAF, one non-flying in 1957 and the other an OTU in 1966, three ranks apart. He attended six non-flying courses in India and one abroad in the UK. As CO/Station Commander/AOC/Commandant, he commanded seven units – two training and five operational – across five ranks.

In thirty-five and a half years he flew a total of 4,261 hours on 22 different aircraft types (piston/jet, single/twin-engine and rotary-wing aircraft) and survived two major flying accidents. He attended two professional flying training courses in India and one abroad in the USA. As a CO, his unit in one case and squadron in the other won the WAC Inter Squadron Weapons Meet twice. As an individual, he received the WAC Arjun a trophy twice for rocketry from two different aircraft types, 14 years and four ranks apart. He was decorated twice, once in peace and once in war.

Of his 30 coursemates commissioned 64 years ago, 15 'octopilots' survive; four of them settled abroad in two countries

and 11 in six different locations in India. Married in 1956, he recently celebrated his 60th wedding anniversary. His family of two children and six grandchildren are currently spread over four continents on both sides of the equator. Co-incidentally, this numerical encapsulation of events in the 21st century, turns out to be the 84th in the 'Ancient Aviator Anecdote' series, being recounted by the author now in his 84th year!

Roots, Leaves and Protocol

Adampur is one of the oldest and largest air bases in our Air Force. On promotion to air rank, I was posted to command it during 1978-79. With four MiG and one Pechora squadron, together with the population of a small township, there was never a dull moment either with operations in the air or support/administrative activities on the ground. Among the many memories of my two-year tenure there, I do recall my first experience of high-level protocol.

I was informed that, on a particular date, the Prime Minister of India, along with the Defence Minister, the Chief Minister of Punjab and the AOC-in-C WAC would all arrive at my air base within a short space of time. The two civilian dignitaries from Delhi were thereafter to transfer from VIP aircraft to rotary wing aircraft and airlifted to a helipad in Jalandhar. As per SOP, I would of course receive the AOC-in-C who would in turn receive the Raksha Mantri (RM). Meanwhile the Chief Minister (CM) would arrive by road and, along with the RM, would receive the Pradhan Mantri (PM). At the Jalandhar helipad, the PM and the RM would be received by the Home Minister of the State. Later in the afternoon, the movement would be reversed, i.e. Jalandhar helipad to Adampur

tarmac by helicopter and then Adampur to Delhi by VIP aircraft.

For reasons of safety the PM and the RM never fly in the same aircraft. I was made in charge of the entire exercise with responsibility to make and execute all arrangements to receive, transfer, see-off and ensure security at our tarmac and the helipad, for which two representatives from the IB would also be present but incognito! Administrative arrangements included refreshments on the tarmac if required (vegetarian snacks only) and standby lighting in case the return was delayed beyond sunset. Though the three helicopters were parked no more than 100 yards from the deplaning aircraft, in view of the PM's age, cars were to be deployed.

The Corps Commander at Jalandhar was a good personal friend and assured me that I had only to position the Air Force personnel and equipment for control and flight safety at the helipad and he would provide 'boots-on-the-ground' to seal and secure the helipad at Jalandhar and our tarmac at Adampur. On the actual day the arrival went off as planned except that the PM desired no refreshments, decided to walk from the aircraft to the helicopter and requested me to accompany him. The entourage followed slowly behind us in procession!

The PM asked me general questions about our air base and then some personal ones ("native place?") and places I had travelled to in the Air Force. I told him I was born in Anand (in his home State) and served in all areas except the East. In those days the only helicopters we had were the light Chetaks. The VVIP sat in front alongside the two pilots, with up to three of his personal staff in the rear. After helping him to strap up in his seat, he smiled, thanked me and said, "Your roots are in Gujarat but the leaves are elsewhere." I wasn't sure how to respond but simply saluted as he lifted off.

The return took place in fading light but went off as planned. After the departure of all the visitors, I sat relaxing in our Mess and shared the PM's enigmatic comment with my senior staff. Our Chief Administrative Officer, who has a great sense of humour, had his own interpretation. "Sir," he said, "the PM was only observing that though you are from Gujarat, you spend your leaves in other places!" We all burst out laughing at this explanation.



Air Chief Marshal Idris Hassan Latif

Idris Bhai

Air Chief Marshal IH Latif, PVSM was commissioned into the (then) Royal Indian Air Force in 1942 and is my senior by a decade in both age and year of commission. This ex-Chief of Air Staff (CAS), Governor of Maharashtra and Ambassador to France is too well known to require any introduction. His life story has been most effectively penned in the book 'The Ladder of his Life' by an author who knows him best – his wife, Bilkees Latif. These recollections are therefore not about his public persona but my personal observations of and interactions with the human being behind the public figure, for near 50 years.

First a disclosure: Idris Latif was never my commanding officer. We first met in the late 1950s when, as a young Flt Lt QFI, I was posted to a Palam-based squadron to look after the flying practice of staff officers on the strength of Air HQ and (then) HQ Operational Command. I was required to carry out air tests, brief visiting aircrew and give dual checks. Wg Cdr IH Latif was one of them who came regularly and I was deeply impressed with his utterly polite and friendly attitude towards even very junior officers like myself. In the mid-1970s, as a Gp Capt, I was in command of the air base in Hakimpet and very involved in the induction of the Polish-origin Iskra trainer aircraft. Air Mshl IH Latif was then the AOC-in-C of Maintenance Command, which had one of their logistics units on my station. He flew down personally to check if I needed any logistics/technical help, and if so, I was to call him directly. In the late 1970s, as AOC Adampur, I had a

most pleasant visit from Air Chief Marshal and Mrs Latif and never felt any pressure from having the CAS on my air base, quite in contrast to my one earlier experience of having the CAS visit my station!

In 1980, while attending the RCDS in London, I was at the Farnborough Air Show seated in the cockpit of an F-16 fighter in the static display, being briefed by their company representative, when I glanced up and saw the CAS of the IAF standing, patiently awaiting his turn. I immediately began to leave the aircraft but he most courteously waved me back. Later, along with our AAs in London and Paris, we had a delightfully informal lunch with families. On my return to India, I was posted to DSSC Wellington where, following the CAS' annual address and visit, he listened patiently to my plans and was most supportive of the improvements I hoped implement and initiate in our Air Wing there. In 1983-85, as an Air Vice Marshal, I was Commandant of the Air Force Academy when His Excellency the Governor of Maharashtra was the Reviewing Officer at one of our bi-annual Graduation Parades. As was the procedure I had drafted his speech for him. With great humility and charm he asked me if I minded his deviating from the draft and went on to deliver a very effective extempore address. In January 1985 both His Excellency and his Begum were gracious enough to attend the marriage reception of my daughter in Mumbai and almost failed to recognise me in a *kurta-pajama*!

Since we both retired in Hyderabad we meet frequently at social and professional events as he continues to take interest in the welfare of air veterans. Our personal relationship is more informal now that we have shed our uniforms. One of our mutual Hyderabad civilian friends once called me up inviting us to a dinner he was hosting for 'Idris Bhai' – the very first time I had heard the CAS so addressed! I asked him what time the chief guest was due, as I would need to reach before him as per service etiquette. He laughed and cheerfully enquired as to whether I had not heard of Hyderabad's 'Late Latifs?' I assured him that I had, but this was one Latif who would never be late – and he wasn't! Among the senior air officers I met and interacted with in the IAF, my icon for humane attributes and *tehzeeb* continues to be 92-year-old Idris Bhai.

Air Vice Marshal (R) Cecil Parker MVC