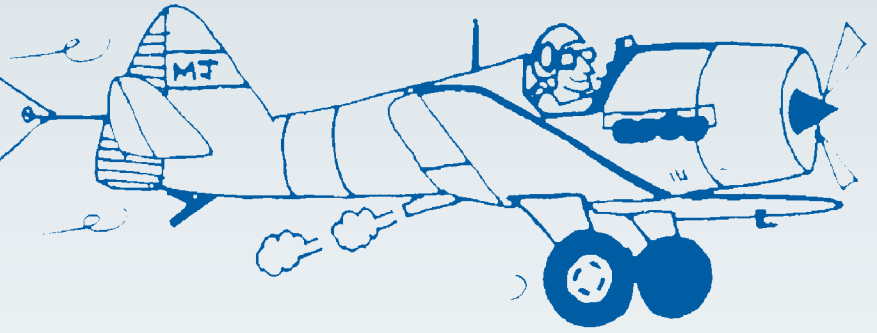
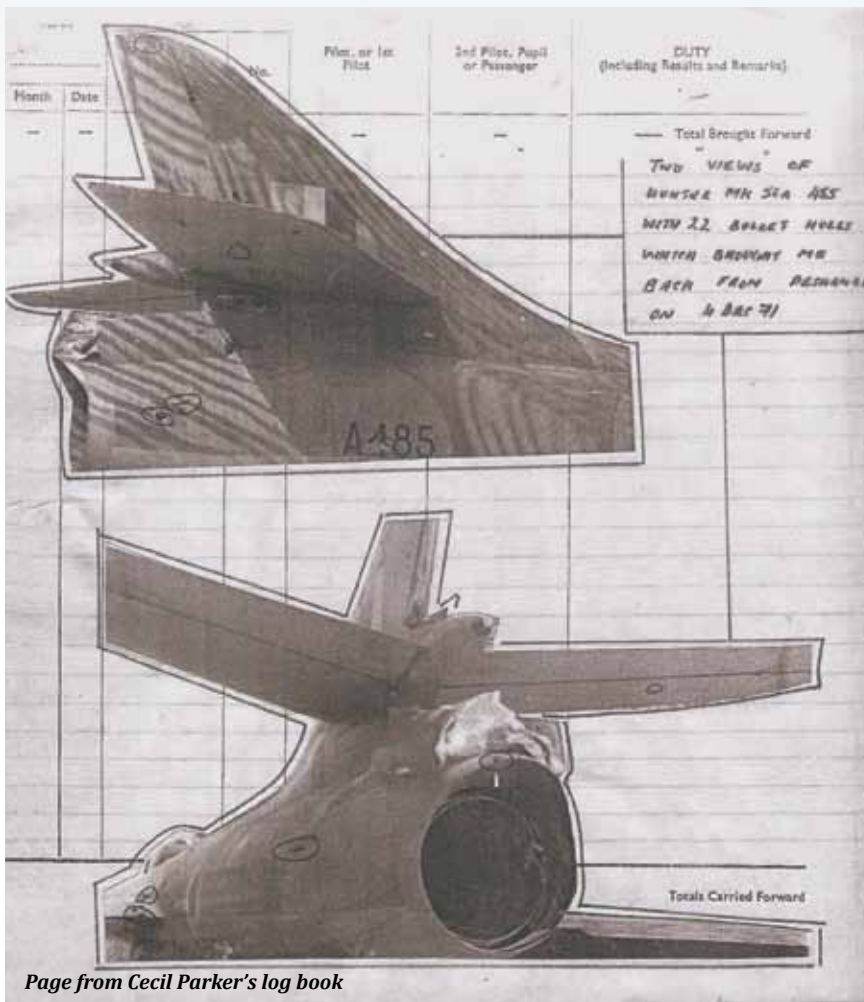


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal (R) Cecil Parker's 1971 Air War



Page from Cecil Parker's log book

4 x 30mm cannon. As a Wing Commander I was commanding No. 20 Squadron, one of the two squadrons equipped with the new Hunter and relocated to Pathankot in early 1971. My war orders included Peshawar air base as one counter air target; we trained accordingly. Owing to its location close to the border, Pathankot was vulnerable, hence all our serviceable aircraft, pilots and supporting technicians went off for night harbour to Ambala. On 03 December '71, when the PAF carried out its pre-emptive strike on Pathankot at 1715 hrs, my squadron was away in Ambala and I was alone at base with two young pilots. I was told to carry out a two-aircraft gun strike on Peshawar at sunrise on 04 December '71. When reminded that my own aircraft would only return much later, I was ordered to take two aircraft from our sister squadron but TOT had to be sunrise Peshawar time. I took Flt Lt CS Dhillon (Channi) as my wingman and briefed him thoroughly. When we reached our sister squadron's tarmac at 4.30 am on 04 December '71, I was upset to see that the two aircraft prepared for us still had their rocket projectile (R/P) rails fitted though I had asked for clean aircraft + four tanks + full ammo. A quick calculation told me that we would lose about 500 lbs of fuel carrying these rails but there was no time to remove them and I would have to forego my combat fuel. Since Channi was not currently night qualified, I kept my nav lights on for him to do a formation take off in the dark. He coped well and we stayed low over our own territory as long as possible before I came in from the west for our first pass on Peshawar air base. We seemed to have taken them by surprise : no ground fire was experienced as

Till sunrise on 04 December '71 the well defended PAF rear air base at Peshawar could only be reached by our twin-engined Canberra light bombers which had attacked it by night during the 1965 Indo-Pak war. In the late 1960s, the IAF had acquired the updated Hunter

Mk 56A aircraft which, with its larger fuel capacity (230 gallons on the inboard pylons) increased its radius of action and range. Operating from Pathankot it was now possible to cross the width of Pakistan and reach Peshawar at low level but with no external weapon load : a gun strike only with

I went for an aircraft parked on the tarmac while Channi opened up on what appeared to be an airfield fuel dump. On our second pass made from the south I realised that there was no gun fire from the ground as the airfield was being capped by their aircraft; two Sabres crossed me diagonally but the early dawn visibility was not good and we set course for home at low level and high speed with an indeterminate number of Sabres in chase.

I opened up our pair and placed Channi about 600 yds to my port so we gave each other cross cover and forced the Sabres to divide their attention. They very slowly closed in and, as Channi and I were in R/T contact, was able to break him to the port and into our own air space calculating that the Sabres would not follow him too deeply. I now had two or three Sabres behind me and as they opened fire I broke into them and reversed taking advantage of the Hunter's turning radius around some high ground. One Sabre could not hold the turn and overshot me right in front. I fired but very few rounds must have been left after my two long bursts at Peshawar so, though the camera gun captured the enemy aircraft I was not sure as to whether I had hit him or not. By now we were approaching Akhnoor area where a fierce land battle seemed to be taking place and both sides opened up on me as I was now travelling west to east!

I knew I had been hit and was very low on fuel, as was Channi who was one minute behind me. Pathankot gave us a direct approach and landing from the north and both our aircraft engines flamed out on the taxi track back to the aircraft pens. Our attack had been successful but my aircraft had 22 hits while Channi's had four. Minutes later the SASO HQ WAC New Delhi was on the line for an immediate debrief and congrats but with orders to repeat the attack immediately. I strongly advised him to defer the repeat attack to a later time but he insisted that the pressure had to be kept up so that the PAF could not use their air force in Peshawar to attack our ground forces. Since these were direct orders and my

own aircraft had returned from Ambala, I had no choice and sent off the next pair after briefing them thoroughly to carry out the attack but not to get involved in air combat over the target. Their attack went through but we lost one Hunter and pilot.

Attock Oil Refinery : 06 & 08 December, 1971

Among the Pakistani 'targets of economic value' allocated to my squadron was the Attock Oil Refinery not too far from Islamabad. Based on Intelligence inputs, we visited our own refineries to learn their vulnerable points. We arranged for our firing range near Jamnagar to place steel sheets of differing widths behind the front gun targets. With my Flight Commander as my wingman and the gun packs in our Hunter fitted with varying sequence of HE (High Explosive) and ball ammo, we made a practice Lo-Hi-Lo flight from Pathankot overflying Ambala and Ahmedabad and carried out a gun strike on Sarmat Range targets firing all four guns. The results helped us determine the optimum belting of ammunition to penetrate steel. It was our

intention to start a fire and allow the fire to do the damage.

On 06 December '71 I led a four-Hunter gun strike with Attock Oil Refinery as our target. Intelligence had briefed us that it was heavily defended with AD Arty. Since such guns were normally controlled by an Air Defence Control Centre, and the nearest one was at PAF air base at Chaklala, I decided to attack Chaklala first to cause disruption. This diversionary attack paid off and our first west-east attack on the refinery, drew no ground fire but our second on the south-north axis drew considerable ground fire. However none of us were hit and we had the unusual sight of a refinery set on fire. The blaze was still visible to our Canberra crew on their night bombing raids.

We repeated the attack two days later when I led another four-Hunter strike but there were mainly charred remains and debris. Along with the IAF attack on the Karachi Oil Refinery on 04 December 71, Pakistan was now running short on fuel which Intelligence told us was being trucked into the country over land.

