

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

Life on the Edge

Seven decades ago, the ancient aviators of today were young lads, many of whom were fascinated with the idea of flight and dreamt of becoming pilots some day. Pre-independence, very few Indians were in the profession of aviation. In those days most parents considered 'flying' as a dangerous occupation that kept one living on the edge. However, unforeseen events often influence mind-sets and a sudden medical crisis in our family brought about a re-think on the part of my father and co-incidental consequences for me. Most of the medical descriptions that follow, were told to me by my mother much later as I had been unconscious for long periods of time.

In 1946, as a young teen-aged school boarder, I came home for the summer holidays running a low fever. As the temperature kept rising and I went off food, our family doctor recommended immediate hospitalisation. I was admitted into the PG hospital in Calcutta where my condition continued to worsen. I grew listless and responded to no treatment. The hospital had diagnosed my condition as an acute case of typhoid which was then endemic. There was a youth of my age in the next bed with similar symptoms and, in the few periods that our consciousness coincided, we communicated briefly. One morning I regained consciousness to find that his bed was empty. In response to my query, my mother said he had gone home (it was only much later that I understood what she had meant). My condition got critical and the hospital prepared my parents for the worst; in fact, I was measured for a coffin.

Suddenly my fever broke, I opened my eyes and felt weak but better, had no idea that 22 days had elapsed but I slowly regained strength sat up in bed and kept down fluids. A very cheerful doctor, along with the ward nurse, visited me frequently and assured me that I was going to be fine but away from school for a few months till I recovered fully. He told my parents that

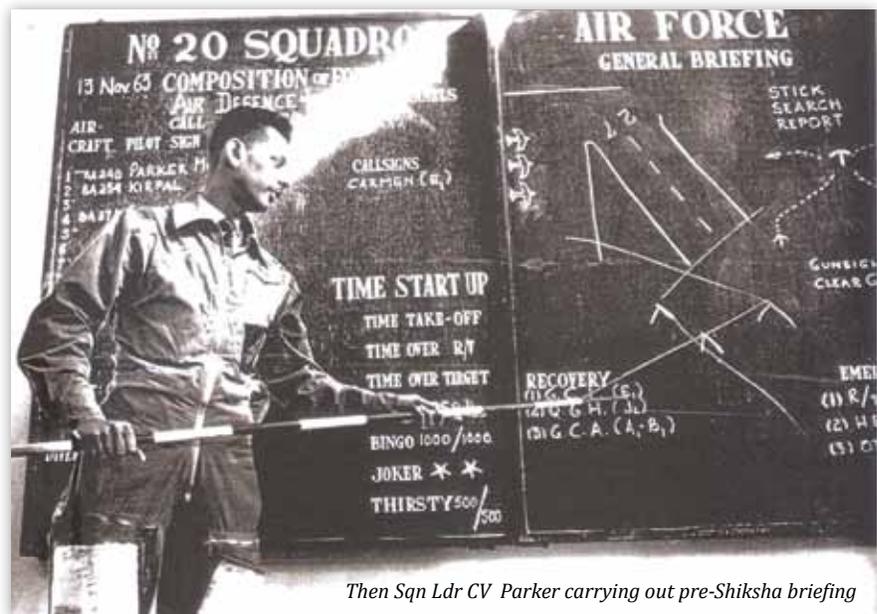
he had no explanation for my 'return from the edge', did not believe in miracles but had just seen one. He was an ex-army Major from Secunderabad who, before the war, had many years of practice in a tea estate in Jalpaiguri.

Five years later, with the active support of my mother and the reluctant consent of my father, I found myself as a flight cadet in the Air Force Academy in Secunderabad. At a social function I was introduced to a pretty young lady teacher with the same surname as the doctor. In fact she was his niece and informed me that her uncle had married the nurse and the couple had immigrated to Australia. I courted the young lady for five years before we married in 1956. Over the next 30 years we moved 15 times on postings while she adapted and coped with running a house, raising two wonderful children, kept teaching, carried out all her commitments as an air force wife and stood by me through all the ups and downs of life on the edge. It was many years before we could build a house of our own to retire in. Now, in the 62nd year of our marriage, she is busy overseeing the travel arrangements

for our next trip abroad to be present at the wedding of the first of our six grandchildren who are spread over three continents, on both sides of the equator. Notwithstanding the risk element in any fighter pilot's career, 'life on the edge' has been very good to this ancient aviator and his family.

'Exercise Shiksha': 1963

In 1963, the Indian Air Force (IAF) had six Hunter Mk.56 squadrons of which four were deployed in the west, and one each in the central and eastern sectors. *Exercise Shiksha* ('Learning') was one of the consequences of the 1962 Sino-India clash a year earlier. It was a multinational air defence exercise by four air forces for the very first time; the RAF based Gloster Javelins at Kalaikunda, the RAAF based their Canberras at Agra and the USAF based a detachment of F-100 Super Sabres at Palam plus radar units both in the east and the west. These three air forces provided the aggressor element against IAF air bases whose air defence was by Hunter and Gnat aircraft in all three sectors over the period 15-18 November.



Then Sqn Ldr CV Parker carrying out pre-Shiksha briefing

I was then a Squadron Leader and the Flight Commander of No.20 Squadron, a Hunter unit based at Palam and tasked with air defence of Delhi, for which we were under the radar control of our signals unit at Najafgarh. Our CO was called to Command / Air HQ for a series of meetings after which he informed us that we would be participating in Ex *Shiksha* purely in the air defence role from our ORP (Operational Readiness Platform). I was required to give a brief for an air interception sortie and thereafter lead a pair to demonstrate a 'scramble' from our underground ORP. This was for the benefit of the USAF personnel to familiarise them with our SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) two days before the exercise commenced. I carried out the briefing on 13 November (*see picture*) and then, along with my wingman, demonstrated a live scramble under control of our SU where representatives of the three aggressor air forces were observers.

I have no knowledge of the totality of Ex *Shiksha*, which is no doubt buried in some file or data base in the archives of Air HQ. Our squadron undertook four to six scrambles per day and my log book tells me that I flew four air interception sorties during the exercise. The success rate was directly proportional to the altitude, i.e. at higher levels the intercept rate was good but at lower heights, less so. The F-100s and Canberras that we intercepted were briefed to take no evasive action and we were permitted to use our camera guns but had to break-off by 200 yards. The major exercise debrief was held at Command/Air HQ and, apart from being informed by our CO that we had performed very well, I really have no knowledge of overall lessons learnt.

I do, however, have recollections of Ex *Shiksha* for two personal reasons. On the penultimate day, the USAF offered the IAF a sortie in the Super Sabre. The offer reached my CO who very kindly suggested that I accept it. I was delighted to go across to their detachment, was welcomed, briefed, kitted out by my counterpart (Major Holly), who then took me up in the rear cockpit of F-100F (63974) I thoroughly enjoyed my very first experience of an aircraft with a reheat engine. On return I suggested to our CO that we reciprocate the gesture. He got through to the AOC-in-C who authorised me to give Major Holly a sortie in our Hunter trainer, which incidentally has side-by-side seating. On



Celebrating an anniversary!

the last day of the exercise I took him up in Hunter Mk66 (BS 364) for a 50-minute sortie. He was absolutely thrilled with the handling characteristics of the aircraft. After deplaning, we informally exchanged 'wings' and, though 54 years have elapsed, I still remember his goodbye: "Thanks Cecil, *Shiksha* has given me a great dollar ride in a truly wonderful kite." I am certain all old Hunter pilots will endorse that view!

No.58 Pilots Course – at 65!

On 30 August 2017, No 58 Pilots Course celebrated its 65th anniversary. The course story actually goes back to March 1951 when 50 young lads from all over India reported to No. 1 Air Force Academy at Ambala. We new flight cadets were given a military welcome which included a sharp haircut and a strict financial restriction of Rs 40 per month! Flying standards were exacting and, after 18 months pilot training on Tiger Moth and Harvard aircraft, only 30 of us newly commissioned pilot officers received our wings from Subroto Mukherjee on 30 August 1952 at Begumpet. Of these, 17 went off to Agra for their twin-engine conversion on Dakotas a while 13 of us reported to Hakimpet for single-engine conversion on Spitfire and Tempest IIA aircraft.

Post their transport conversion, the 17 went on to fly the Liberator, Canberra, Avro, Viscount, Il-42 and An-12 with two also converting on to rotary wings on the Chetak helicopter. At FTW meanwhile, grounding of the Tempest fleet midway through our fighter conversion, saw the 13 of us posted directly to the first jet squadrons where, for the next many years we flew the Vampire, Toofani, Mystere, Hunter, Gnat and MiG-21. Including their instructional

flying on HT-2, Prentice, Iskra and Kiran aircraft, these 30 pilots have a collective experience of just over 100,000 flying hours on 20 different IAF types over a period of 37 years (1951-88).

Of the original 30 pilots who graduated 65 years ago, today 12 coursemates, with an average age of 86 years, are very much around and continue the course ritual of a get-together as frequently as possible. Advent of the internet certainly helps us all keep in touch with each other and with the families of departed coursemates too. Six of the 12 air veterans are in the NCR (Gurgaon / Noida / Delhi), two in Telengana, one in Goa, two in Australia and one who commutes between Mumbai and London! On 30 August 2017, there was a Reunion Anniversary lunch at the Golf Club at Air Force Station New Delhi while in Secunderabad a smaller gathering (*see picture*) took place at a private residence for lunch and reminiscence. Notwithstanding spectacles, dentures, hearing aids and walking sticks, there was excellent bonhomie at both gatherings with children / grandchildren quite amused at the tales and recollections of those octo-pilots in their salad days!

The last of our coursemates retired in 1988 and our course can look back with pride at it's contribution to our air force. Its members participated in both the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars, produced 15 COs, 11 QFIs, two test pilots, one air attaché and one MVC gallantry awardee. The 18 members who have preceded us (four through flying accidents) no doubt looked down with equal pride on 30 August 2017 as they already know that old pilots do not die but only fly away...