

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal (R) Cecil Parker and his.....

SWARNIM VIJAY VARSH (The Vijay Mashaal in Hyderabad)

V*vijay Mashaal* : To mark the 50th year since India's victory in the 1971 indo-Pak war, the Prime Minister lit four Vijay Mashaals on 16 December in Delhi. Each of these Victory Torches was carried by runners to the home of every recipient of the PVC, MVC, and VrC gallantry awardee of that war wherever located, ie North, South, East or West of the country. The southern Vijay Mashaal reached Hyderabad on 8 February 2021.

11.2.2021: The felicitation ceremony was organised by the army and held in the central parade grounds in Secunderabad. There was a display of weaponry and the function was open to the public. It commenced with wreath laying at the Martyrs Memorial, reception of the Vijay Mashaal by the Governor, felicitation of five awardees by her Excellency Governor of Telengana and included a band concert, cultural programme and speeches. The awardees comprised one MVC (Air Force) and four VrCs (two each from the Air Force and the Army including three NOK widows). Citations were read out and each awardee was presented a commemoration plaque by the Chief Guest. (see images).

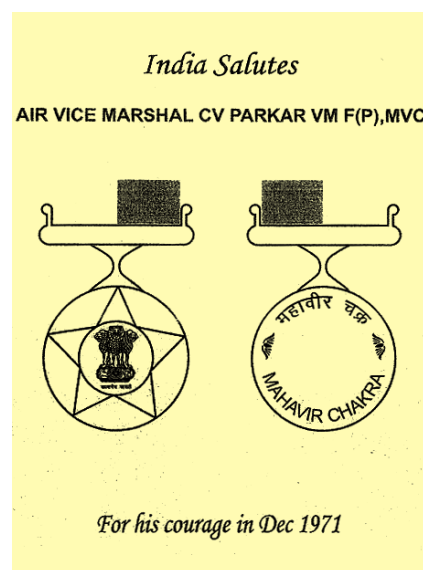
12.2.2021: A single-service felicitation ceremony was held at the air force station Begumpet, where 70 years ago, this writer had been a pilot trainee! The three air force awardees (one MVC and two VrC NOK widows) were joined by 47 air warriors who had participated in the 1971 war. The Victory Torch was jointly received by the three gallantry awardees who then inaugurated the Vijay Vatika and planted saplings. Thereafter there was a documentary

film on the war, a performance by the air force symphony band, an audio visual of each of the three gallantry awardee and felicitation of all 50 air veterans by the Commandant Air Force Academy along with the gift of a shawl.

13.2.2021: Mid-morning saw the lit Vijay Mashaal, carried by a team of runners escorted by outriders and accompanied by the air force symphony orchestra brought to 'Parkhaven', 25 Vayupuri AFOCHS Ltd where it was received by this writer. A short ceremony was held for the small group of attendees (neighbours, friends and managing committee members of our society) all of whom were sanitized, masked and socially distanced. After this brief but very emotional ceremony, the Vijay Mashaal was taken by its escorts for its

onward journey down south and its eventual meet-up with the other three in Delhi on 16 December 2021 on Vijay Diwas.

14.2.2021: Not part of the foregoing three functions, but following immediately thereafter, was the 65th wedding anniversary of a very tired couple who did manage to host a small tea party to friends to celebrate the occasion in the evening. The three outings of the Vijay Mashaal had been widely covered by the media; we were flooded with congratulatory messages from family, friends and old colleagues. It needed a few days rest before my wife and I could return to the routine of our normal, quiet pace of retired life in Vayupuri. What a wonderful experience of being remembered and honoured it has been for this old pilot now in his 89th year!



FORGETTING TO REMEMBER



Tempest II (photo: Colin Cooke)

Seventy years ago this writer was a flight cadet undergoing pilot training at No 1 AFA Begumpet and was commissioned there on 30 August 1952. On 12 February 2021, three of us Hyderabad based air force gallantry awardees/ NOKs from the 1971 Indo Pak war, were invited to Begumpet to be felicitated in commemoration of Swarnim Vijay Varsh. As we drove through air force station Begumpet, I recognised an old building which had housed our Parachute Section; it was still standing and my memory went back to an incident there 69 years ago.

Post-commissioning, 14 of us went to nearby Hakimpet to undergo our fighter conversion. On 28 October 1952 the Centaurus aero engine of the Tempest IIA aircraft I was flying burst into flames; after a traumatic struggle I managed to bale out and on landing became the youngest Indian member of the Caterpillar Club. My instructor, Flt Lt Hosali, familiarised me with the tradition that all members of the club were expected to make a cash gift to the SEW (Safety Equipment Worker) who had packed the parachute, and host a party for the Section. (All this was in the pre ejection seat era when parachutes were packed and operated manually). He suggested that a gift of Rs. 50, plus a tea party would demonstrate my thanks and that he would make the necessary arrangements.

We had drawn our first salaries so I still had about fifty rupees when he dropped me



off at the old barrack building in Begumpet where I was received by the Sergeant-in-Charge and introduced to Corporal Jaiswal who had packed my parachute. Both in age and service he was my senior and seemed a trifle embarrassed to receive a cash gift from a young newly commissioned pilot officer! The arrival of tea and snacks lightened the atmosphere in our small gathering of five persons. We soon discovered that Jaiswal belonged to Ranchi (then in Bihar) where I myself had studied in the 1940s and were soon communicating quite freely. The tea bill of Rs. 7 was handed over to me and I was deeply embarrassed to find that I had only Rs. 5 in my wallet! I had to borrow Rs. 2 from Cpl Jaiswal who cheerfully loaned me the amount with a laugh.

A few days later one of my coursemates visiting Begumpet offered to take my Rs. 2 and hand it over but returned saying that Jaiswal was on leave outstation. Meanwhile, owing to a series of conrod failures in the Centaurus engine, the Tempest was grounded, our training was curtailed and we were posted to our very first squadrons. I was to report to No 7 Squadron which was equipped with Vampires and was delighted as I had never even seen a jet aircraft before! In all the excitement, I completely forgot my debt.

A decade later I was a flight commander in a squadron based in Palam and attended the Air Force Day function of inviting all the SNCOs to the Officers Mess for a glass of beer. One of our guests peered at my name tab and asked politely if I was the same pilot who had bailed out at Hakimpet in 1952. I said I was and he smilingly responded, "In which case Sir you still owe me two rupees!" I was happy to meet up with Flt Sgt Jaiswal again; much laughter (and beer) covered my apologies and his protests while I insisted upon repaying my debt immediately! We caught up with our respective news and I learned that, having completed his service, he would soon be leaving the air force. We never met again.

On our return drive from Begumpet after the felicitation function I related this anecdote to my wife. Unfortunately, in the dark, I was unable to identify or point out the old barrack building where this story had begun near seven decades ago. 🦋