

Legacy of the MiG-21

India's enduring warrior of the skies



MiG-21, the most produced supersonic fighter, has been a cornerstone of the Indian Air Force for over six decades, demonstrating incredible versatility from the 1971 Dacca bombing to downing an F-16 in 2019. Despite early operational challenges and a controversial “flying coffin” nickname, its adaptability and long service have cemented its legacy as a pivotal aircraft in Indian military aviation.

In the history of military aviation, no fighter has been made in such large numbers—more than 11,500 worldwide, with 850 of them flown by the Indian Air Force. None has been so versatile, so long-serving, so glorified—and so unkindly reviled—as the MiG-21.

December 1971: Indian troops had surrounded Dacca, yet the Pakistan Army was holding out. General Sam Manekshaw's radio appeals to surrender were not having much impact. The Pakistani troops were waiting for their guardian angels to save them.

The ‘angels’ were on their way. US President Richard Nixon, who had armed Pakistan and warned India against war, had dispatched the 7th Fleet, led by nuclear powered carrier USS Enterprise. The fleet had entered the Bay of Bengal and was steaming towards Chittagong.

Signals picked up by air intelligence revealed that East Pakistan's military governor A.M. Malik had called a meeting at the Dacca Circuit House, inviting UN representative John Kelly. If Malik appealed for UN or US help, India's hands would be tied and victory would slip away. The meeting had to be prevented—without spilling civilian or foreign blood. All eyes turned to Group Captain Malcolm Wollen, who was in control of two MiG-21 squadrons in the east. Barely an hour remained for the Dacca meeting when orders reached the squadrons in Guwahati and Hasimara; strike near the building where the meeting was going to take place, but avoid killing. Dacca was a 20 minute flight away.