

'I learnt more than flying from them' series

Air Marshal (R) Harish Masand says...

...MiG-21 Fishbed: The bedrock of Indian defence



Photo by Simon Watson/Vayu

My introduction to the MiG-21 was a strange story full of twists and turns that needs to be told as this venerable fighter that formed the bedrock of Indian defence of its skies takes its last bow with the Indian Air Force and bids adieu to it on 26 September 2025 after over 63 years of yeoman service. The lessons the aircraft taught me are still ingrained in my memory and I thought this would be an appropriate occasion to share these. The aircraft entered service with our Air Force just after the humiliating defeat against China in the Himalayas on 1 April 1963 with 28 Squadron, "The First Supersonics", at Chandigarh under the command of then Wing Commander Dilbagh Singh who went on to become the Chief of Air Staff in early 1980s. India had not used its combat elements in this war with China for reasons that have been later analysed in great detail by many, and criticised, since use of offensive air elements may just have turned the outcome of the War and saved us from a humiliating defeat. The MiG-21 induction was accelerated after this war as was the intake of the Air Force in its expansion plans. During this, "The War that Wasn't" by Shiv Kunal Verma, I was still in my final year of school in

Indore and seeing the tanks and lorries full of soldiers roll by the main road in front of our house to the railway yard for loading and dispatch to the front only made my desire to join the armed force, in particular the Air Force as a fighter pilot stronger. Little did I even dream then that I would have the good fortune of commanding The First Supersonics in 1987 to convert it on to the MiG-29s.

Somehow, I managed to join the Air Force in 1966, against my father's as well as my college Principal's wishes since I was doing pretty well as an engineering student, and was fortunate to get my wings as a fighter pilot on 31 December 1967. Amazingly, the personnel branch in the Air Force decided that I should go to a Hunter squadron despite my merit and standing in the course while pilots a year junior to me went straight to MiG-21s after doing their short conversion on Hunters in Operational Training Unit in Jamnagar. Like they say, everything happens for the best and I accepted this posting to Hunters with that thought in mind. Though the Hunter was a pleasure to fly, the Hunters were then getting a little old in the teeth and had serviceability and availability issues when I joined 37 Squadron, "The Black Panthers", in Hasimara.