

The First Jets In Asia

In January 1949, No. 7 Squadron moved to Palam (Delhi), a dream city for the battle weary pilots and airmen who had lived in tents in the sub-zero temperatures of winter-time Srinagar. The Squadron had acquitted itself brilliantly and with honour during its six years of existence, virtually all of which were at war. The only regret was that the pilots had not got the opportunity to tangle in true air-to-air combat. Both during the Second World War and the J&K Operations, the Squadron's forte remained tactical-reconnaissance and close air support to the Army plus ground attack. Of course, every fighter pilot dreams of the classical aerial engagement, but in this respect No. 7 Squadron would have to wait for another 16 years when the two nations would go to war, over Kashmir again.

Flying was limited by the lack of spares and attrition during the 15-months of operations in J&K and this kept most Tempests on ground. Additional Tempests had been ordered from the U.K., and in March 1949, Sqn. Ldr. Masillamani and Flg. Offr. Lalkoke were sent to England to ferry Tempests back to India, but both had force-landing incidents on the ferry flight.

No. 7 Squadron was in for a pleasant surprise when it was selected to be associated with the first jet fighters to be received by India's air arm; nay, the first jet fighters with any air force of Asia. In June 1949, a flight was established by Air HQ as the "Aircraft Testing Unit" (ATU) with the aim of inducting Vampires into IAF service, becoming the first formation outside the West to operate jet aeroplanes.

The de Havilland Vampire jet fighter was just too late to see service during World War II but was an epoch-marking aircraft, with a speed well in excess of 500 mph over a wide range of altitudes, was highly manoeuvrable, a pleasant aircraft to fly and easy to handle. In fact the Vampire initiated some 25 Air Forces throughout the World into the jet age. Initially christened the Spider Crab, the outstanding design feature of the aircraft was its twin boom layout

which was selected in order to keep the jet pipe as short as possible and so minimise the inevitable thrust power losses.

The Vampire was built around an egg-shaped nacelle, which embodied the engine mounting, the wing-root air intakes and wing attachments. The monocoque nacelle was, strangely, built of wood and consisted of balsa sandwiched between two thin plywood skins, the two half-shells being joined together along the top and bottom. The wing was of all-metal construction, with split flaps, outboard of which were the air-brakes. Unlike propeller driven fighters of the piston-engine era, the Vampire's pilot had an excellent field of view. The main landing gear, too, was made unusually short in the absence of a propeller and retracted outward into the wings while the nose leg retracted rearwards into the nacelle. The lack of any ergonomics whatsoever in the cockpit provided for an "airbrake-lever", much like a "flap lever" in current multi-engine aircraft, on the left console. This was the first IAF aircraft to sport airbrakes, another "fancy" new-gadget for the pilots to boast of, having been used to the massive torque of the four-bladed propeller on the Tempest till then. Perhaps most significant of all was the

tricycle type undercarriage providing for simple and easy landings. From a pilot's point of view, the lack of any swing every time one opened or closed throttle (a significant problem on the Tempests and Spitfires) was heavenly. The sheer speed available at a touch of the finger tips was exhilarating. The Vampire was armed with four 20 mm Hispano cannon in the nose and could carry eight 3" rockets or 1000 lbs of bombs under each wing.

The first Vampires were quickly superseded by improved versions, with more powerful engines and the F. Mk.III also had increased internal fuel capacity. Three such models were diverted to the RIAF from RAF stocks to facilitate trials in tropical conditions and prepare for large-scale induction of the jet fighter into Indian service. The export version of the Vampire Mk.5 was designated the FB Mk.52 and was a ground-attack, fighter-bomber variant with a re-stressed wing of shorter span, with a re-designed longer-stroke landing gear, could carry 2000 lb of bombs or rockets underwing and had outstanding manoeuvrability. The Vampire FB 52 which supplanted all piston-engined fighters of the IAF, was powered by a de Havilland Goblin 2 centrifugal-flow turbojet rated at 3100 lb thrust.



The very first Vampire of the Indian Air Force (HB544) in flight over north India.