

Testing Times

A Test Pilot Looks Back

India has long had the distinction of training its own experimental test pilots (and engineers), the only country outside the West to do so. Perspective planning by some of India's senior Air Commanders in the 1950s resulted in the first three IAF fighter pilots being trained as TPs in England, some later went to France and just a few, to the United States. From the early 1970s, the IAF has trained its own ETPs at the Aircraft & Systems Testing Establishment (ASTE), in Bangalore as reviewed in this exclusive article by one of India's pioneer Test Pilots, Gp. Capt. Kapil Bhargava.

The Indian aircraft industry began in December 1940 with the birth of Hindustan Aircraft Limited (HAL). During World War II, HAL did great work overhauling aircraft and assembling some. It became the first certified repair base for Douglas Dakotas in Asia. It also overhauled PBV Catalinas, the amphibian aircraft. One may not believe it today, but the Catalinas used to land in Bellendur Tank south of the present Bangalore Airport. The aircraft taxied in the water to the northern edge of the lake and then rolled up to cement pads on land. One can still make out some of these pads, even though the area has been neglected and the lake is drying fast. It may even become a runway if current ideas of airport expansion take shape.

The first important flight testing job started soon after WW II ended. When the Americans withdrew from India after the surrender of Japan, they left behind many war surplus aircraft, including B-24 Liberator bombers abandoned at Kanpur. The Americans had made sure that they were only scrap metal—or so they thought. Bulldozers were driven into the planes and sand poured into turning engines to ruin them. With careful cannibalisation, HAL work parties however repaired many aircraft. These were just about airworthy and gradually nursed back



Of great historical interest is this photograph of the prototype HF-24 Marut at Bangalore in 1964: seen are some of India's pioneer test pilots, Suranjan Das, Inder Chopra and P.K. Dey.

to Bangalore by Captain Munshi who was then the Chief Test Pilot (CTP) of HAL. His work and courage have not been recognised enough. After their overhaul and satisfactory performance during flight testing, the B-24s were delivered to the Indian Air Force, whose two bomber squadrons (Nos 5 and 6) were equipped with Liberators and maintained for many

years. The last of these aircraft in a flying condition was presented to a UK museum and ferried there by Wg Cdr IM Chopra (Chopie) when he was CTP with HAL.

The IAF had an increasing need for flight testing. An Aircraft Testing Unit (ATU) was raised in 1948 to test and accept Vampire aircraft, the first jets to come to India. In the absence of



Group Captain Suranjan Das.