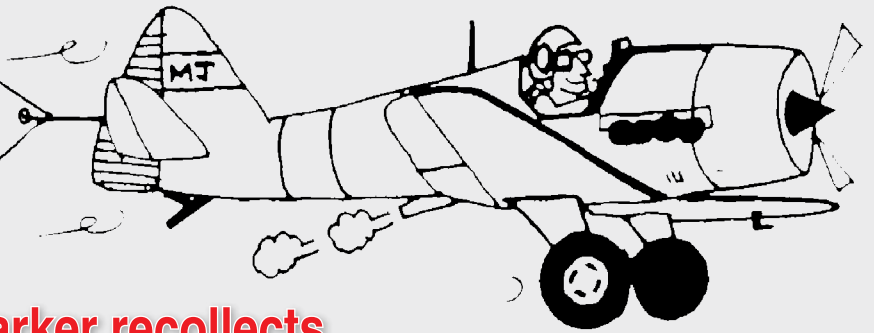


# Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



## Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

### The last of the few

28 October 2018 marked the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my bail-out from a Tempest aircraft on fire while undergoing my fighter conversion at CTU Hakimpet in 1952. On that date I was still in my teens and was probably the youngest Indian member of the Caterpillar Club. It continues to remain one of the more unforgettable experiences in my life. Many years later, while researching for articles on the safety record of the Tempest IIA—and Indian membership of the Caterpillar Club—Air HQ made available to me their entire flight safety data. Both articles have since been published but it was the one on the Tempest that elicited many responses from aviation enthusiasts with air force ancestry in the Spitfire and Tempest era of the Indian Air Force.

The data provided to me was recorded only from 1950 onwards and for earlier years I had to depend upon the personal recollections of my seniors who were very helpful and headed by our late MIAF Arjan Singh, DFC. Partition had left our fledgling

air force with a truncated inventory of trainer aircraft (Tiger Moth and Harvard), some combat aircraft (Spitfire and Tempest) and T/ME transport / bomber (Dakota and Liberator). Thanks to World War II however, we had a young but experienced corps of aviators, technicians and administrators who laid the foundation of the IAF post-Independence in 1947. It was they who ensured that nascent Indian military air power (Dakota and Tempest) was provided immediately and effectively for air support in the 1947-48 operations in Kashmir.

The Tempest IIA (a mark flown only by the IAF) served the IAF from 1946-53. It did not have a very good safety record owing to the many connecting-rod failures in its suspect Centaurus aero-engine. In the early 1950s, No. 4 Squadron in Poona had a 3-D sequence of Tempest fatalities: first Sqn Ldr Ken David (CO), followed by Fg Offr Divecha (ex 56 PC) and Plt Offr Dave (ex 57 PC). The story doing the rounds then was that Air HQ immediately posted out Flt Lt Desa – but I cannot vouch for that!



*Rare photograph of Hawker Tempest II in early RIAF 'chakra' markings with No.1 Squadron 'Tiger' crest painted front of the cockpit*



*Tempest IIs of the IAF's No.8 Squadron with the standard saffron-white-green roundels adopted in 1948*

Meanwhile in late 1952, 14 of us from No 58 PC (Pilots Course) had our own trio of Tempest accidents at Hakimpet. The first was a dead-engine wheels-up forced landing on the side of the runway done very well by one of my coursemates. This was followed by my own bail-out which is the only recorded successful one from a Tempest. The third was the unfortunate first fatal accident in our course post-commissioning; we lost our naval aviator trainee who went down with his aircraft. There were reports of similar mishaps and accidents from Barrackpore, Ambala and Jammu. The Tempest was grounded and the 13 of us joined the generation of pilots who transitted directly from piston-engined aircraft to jets (Vampire FB Mk.52) as type-trainers and simulators were still in the future; we learned to cope.

With the passage of time there must now be very few of us ancient aviators alive who have flown Spitfires and Tempests. Since these two aircraft were grounded or decommissioned in early 1953, my pilots course was the last to have flown them. Of the 13 of us who graduated from CTU Hakimpet in December 1952, five are still very much around. For the record (and benefit of any future historian) these are: Wg Cdr MW Tilak (4331) in Perth WA; Sqn Ldr RC Mariano (4357) in Adelaide SA; Wg Cdr RL Badhwar (4341) in Gurugram; AVM DE Satur (4339) in NOIDA and this writer (4346) in Secunderabad. Their average age is a shade older than our air force which marked its 86<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 8 October 2018. For these last of the few the experience will remain a collective #WeToo memory.

### Politics, religion and sex

If the reader is expecting an intellectual dissertation on the titled subject(s), he/ she will be disappointed and is advised to read no further. In the air force academy 67 years ago, we teen-aged flight cadets were taught that 'officers-and-gentlemen' must never (R) never discuss 'politics', 'religion' or 'sex' in any officers mess. The origin for this social injunction was traced to 'Customs of the Service' authored by one Gp Capt Stradling of the RAF in the 1940s. Since the IAF evolved from the RAF, many of the latter's policies on

training, tactics and traditions were continued by our air force till we created our own.

One lasting legacy from our ex-colonial rulers is the apolitical nature of our armed forces. As a college student in the late 1940s in Kolkata (then Calcutta), politics was only a word, but .... at that stage most of us lads were football crazy, both on the field and in support of our favourite team(s). A certain 'forward looking' political party let it be known that members of its youth wing would get free tickets to the forthcoming IFA cup finals. This was incentive enough to sign up. We were required to march up and down College Street carrying banners and shouting the refrain to protest or demand slogans in both English and Bengali. At the end we were given a motivational talk and a coupon for a cup of coffee and a cutlet at the Coffee House. It was great fun but in a few months, the strict warden of our hostel (a Belgian Jesuit father) got wind of our Sunday outings and put a stop to some promising political careers! (Thankfully the IFA finals were also over).

In the course of my final interview at the Air Force Selection Board in 1950 my IO (Interviewing Officer) casually asked if I had ever been involved in politics. I was unsure how to answer so decided to share the political experience related above. He merely smiled and advised me to stay away from politics if I were selected. I joined the air force in 1951 and was soon immersed in the joys of learning how to fly and making new friends from communities all over India. Religion per se had always been a personal issue but thanks to my colleagues and new friends I had the opportunity and privilege of visiting gurudwaras, temples, mosques, a synagogue (in the USA) and various denominations of churches in many countries. I came to learn and better understand the strengths of differing faiths/ beliefs. Almost every single-engined, single-cockpit fighter pilot has, at least once in his flying career, muttered 'Oh God' when faced with a sudden, unexpected emergency in the air, and this includes declared atheists! This did not make us any more or less religious but it certainly sharpened our flight safety practices.

To the generation of my youth, the word 'sex' related exclusively to gender and certainly not to any activity. Of course the subject of 'girls' was of great interest to young lads learning to cope with hyper active hormones. However, in those days, having a girl

friend involved no more than holding hands but had the promise of being invited to a home cooked meal – a pleasurable change from mess food! Since we young bachelor officers moved frequently

on postings, the quest for home cooked meals had, on occasion, to be periodically repeated !

Our media today (print/ electronic and professional/ social) is replete with the three topics of politics, religion and sex. Our flight cadets of today, which includes young ladies, are freely exposed to the media and are certainly more knowledgeable than my generation at the same point of time. I sometimes wonder if the prohibited subjects are still under embargo or perhaps, with the passage of time, discarded by default in the Indian Air Force of 2019? 🦋

**To all my readers, a Happy New Year !**