



## Three Significant Air Experiences

### CTU Hakimpet : 28 October 1952

On that date, as a newly commissioned young Pilot Officer undergoing fighter conversion, with great difficulty I was able to bail out of a blazing Tempest aircraft HA 596. It was my first face to face encounter with imminent death and the experience influenced my future learning and teaching, lending credence to Murphy's law that 'if anything can go wrong, it will'. The only other recorded successful bail-out from a Tempest in the IAF was in 1948 (Flt Lt Noronha). Currently I am the oldest living Indian member of the Caterpillar Club.

*In a letter dated 21 July 1994 to me, then-ACM Arjan Singh DFC wrote: "You were lucky to get away with it in a Tempest, a difficult aircraft to fly and land much less to bail out of..."*

### OTU Jamnagar : 1966-69

As a newly promoted Wing Commander, I raised and commanded the IAF's first Hunter-equipped Operational Training Unit at Jamnagar. This, our seventh Hunter unit, was created from resources allotted (read: begged, borrowed or stolen) from the existing six Hunter squadrons. It was my greatest learning experience in the innovative procurement and management of resources (human/material), time and quality control. Though the Air Force recognised my effort by the award of the VM, my greater reward was the superb professional performance of my young pilots in the 1971 Indo-Pak war, many of whom rose to high ranks/appointments. 48 years later the unit continues its training role equipped with MiG aircraft.

*In a letter dated 8 November 2003, Air Commodore PM Wilson VrC, ex-Station Commander Jamnagar 1968-72 wrote, "Nosey your great work in OTU in 1966-69 paid off in 1971..."*

### No. 20 Squadron, Pathankot : December 1971

Of the 128 sorties flown by No.20 Squadron from 4 to 15 December 1971, most of the counter air missions were led by me

personally as the CO. None were however more dramatic, dangerous and daring as the first gun strike on Peshawar PAF airbase at sunrise on 4 December 1971. My own squadron's aircraft, pilots and technicians were in night harbour at Ambala on 3 December and I was alone at base with two young pilots. I was ordered to carry out a two-aircraft mission with two Hunter Mk.56A aircraft from our sister squadron on base. My young wingman coped excellently including his very first night take-off. We were lucky to carry out the attack and get away from a number of Sabre aircraft on CAP, which then chased us as far as Akhnoor, where we had to face ground fire from both sides as the land battle commenced. We landed with 22 hits on my aircraft and four on his with both aircraft flaming out on the taxi track after landing. The Rashtrapati conferred the MVC on me but No. 20 Squadron continues to be the most highly decorated squadron in IAF.

*A highly decorated pilot and air officer from the PAF was my colleague at the RCDS London in 1980. Reminiscing over the air operations of 1971, he commented: "Your guys were nuts to put Hunters into Peshawar when they did and you were very lucky" I assured him that our luck was earned by thorough training and unconventional tactics applied with IAF jugaad!*

### Army Air Co-op

In early October my wife and I were invited to an Air Force Day function to mark the 82<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the IAF. The party was hosted by and held at an air base I had commanded 39 years ago. The Officers' Mess looked quite splendid with its lighting, decoration, ceremonial uniforms of the Army, Navy, Air Force and colourful attire of the ladies. Being the same age as the Air Force, I was apparently the oldest guest present. All the invited air veterans (each of whom had served earlier at this very base) were personally welcomed and felicitated by the AOC.

Age has its privileges and, apart from our host who ensured constant hospitality,

small groups of young officers and their wives (no doubt discreetly propelled by the PMC) came to keep us company. This social interaction with the present young generation, most of whom were in the age group of our grandchildren and some of whom were themselves service children, helped us understand the many changes that constantly take place. Since I have a hearing disability, I was relieved to have my wife by my side to amplify my audio reception!

One such group had a very friendly, articulate and perceptive young Air Force wife who, having spotted my hearing aid, spoke slowly and clearly much to my relief. She and her husband were to move shortly on their first posting and were awaiting the packers and movers. In response to her queries on similar experiences while in service, I explained that in our near 59 years of marriage, the first 30 had been spent in the Air Force and involved 16 'permanent' moves for which my wife was the packer and I was the mover!

The young lady smiled, told us she herself was the daughter of an Army officer and felt that army officers' wives were very fortunate as they had their husband's batman to help them and wondered why the Air Force did not have the same facility? With a straight face I told her that in my experience, Air Force wives were far luckier. She challenged me to substantiate that claim much to the amusement of our group. I responded that, though Army officers' wives were fortunate to get the help of a batman, Air Force wives soon found that they were married to trained batmen and hence had no requirement for this facility. She cheerfully joined in the laughter that followed this quip but this quick-witted *fauji beti* had the last word by declaring, "Sir no doubt you are right but I do wish their training had been done by the Army and not just left to their mothers!" Touché, young lady.

*Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker (retd.)*