

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects

The Ties That Bind

The youth of my generation who were educated at public schools in the Raj era, will still recall their school motto and tie which was integral to the school uniform. The former, in my case was Latin: *Non Nascor Mibi Solum* i.e., Live Not For Self Alone. I must confess we did not always live up to it, but that is another story! The introduction of the school tie however was the forerunner of many more over the years, some for sartorial effect and others for identification.

One practical use of the tie was demonstrated to me by my paternal grandfather, an agriculturist in a tiny village in what is today Chhattisgarh. He was the village *sarpanch* and I had never seen him dressed in anything other than kurta, pyjama and *chappals*. During World War II my school in Namkum (Bihar) had been taken over by the Army to serve as a military hospital, with the school temporarily relocated to Allahabad (UP). We no longer had the privilege of a special school train and all boarders were required to be personally escorted by parents/guardians to the new

location. I had just entered my teens and spent my summer vacation with my grandparents in the village. My father in Kolkata had requested my grandfather to escort me to Allahabad and, in view of the prevailing sartorial culture, had suggested that he wear western attire, including a tie, which he mailed to him by post and which I was required to knot for him. On arrival at our destination, we went to the railway waiting room where grandfather freshened up and emerged looking very smart and spruce in shirt, trousers and shoes. When I looked for the tie to knot, I found it looped neatly around his waist substituting for a belt he had forgotten to bring!

From school to college to the Air Force my wardrobe included a growing number of ties from academies, reunions, anniversaries, and by way of gifts. In 1980, while attending the Royal College of Defence Studies in London, the dress code was invariably a suit and therefore a tie was *de rigueur*. One day on the London tube, an older gentleman in front glanced frequently in my direction. When I disembarked at Earl's Court, he followed me and very politely asked if I

was wearing the Caterpillar Club tie? I complimented him on his keen eyesight and confirmed that I was. He then removed his scarf and I saw that he was wearing the same tie. In the station coffee shop we introduced ourselves and shared our experiences leading to membership of the club. I explained that I was from India and had bailed out from a Tempest fighter on fire in 1952. He was a Canadian and was the captain of a Lancaster RAF bomber during World War II and had also to bail out from his aircraft on fire over France in 1944. We exchanged names, addresses, and numbers and promised to keep in touch. From this chance encounter some years later, the story of my club membership appeared in a Canadian publication, 'Bless You Brother Irwin (The Caterpillar Club Story)' by John A Neal and titled by him as 'Bailout Over India.'

On retirement I disposed of most of my fancy ties but today, in my 85th year, I find I still have 30 hanging in my wardrobe, half of which are 'regimental' in nature and kept only for sentimental reasons. I am now very rarely required to wear a tie, so



Hawker Tempest II of the Indian Air Force

much so that I have almost forgotten how to knot one. But also in retirement, I have made the delightful discovery that any brand of whisky invariably tastes better in kurta, pyjama and *chappals*!

Republic Day Flypasts

This piece, being written in January, brings to mind the Republic Day flypasts in which I had actively participated in the first two decades after we became a republic. The spectators, thronging both sides of Rajpath in New Delhi, saw only the impeccable position-keeping of up to 64 aircraft flying in 16 boxes of 4 aircraft each. We fliers heard no applause nor saw anything other than the aircraft we were forming on and remained almost 'frozen' in position until far out of sight past India Gate.

The preparations for the R-Day flypast commence immediately in the new year and involves a great deal of planning, co-ordination, and rehearsals, all controlled by HQ WAC in Palam. The composition of the flypast grew rapidly into a mix of rotary, fixed-wing, piston, jet, single and twin-engine types, and transport/fighter blocks from a number of squadrons operating from several bases. These blocks were required to join up at the RV point and, orbiting like an airborne snake, uncoil into a mile-long straight line by the run-in point marked by

smoke candles to align the flypast with the dome of Rashtrapati Bhawan.

My very first R-Day flypast was in a Vampire in 1954 followed by one in a Toofani. In 1956, as a young QFI in Jodhpur, I was part of a detachment of 15 Harvard trainers that provided three boxes that year. The rest of my flypasts were all on the Hunter as Flt Cdr and then CO of a Palam/Hindon-based squadron. In the early 1960s a certain Group Captain commanding an air force station (who shall remain nameless), decided to lead the block himself in a Hunter T66 trainer with the other seat occupied by a navigator. On the first rehearsal, the visibility west of Delhi was poor and he missed both the smoke candles and Rajpath! The embarrassing debrief that followed was not in any way helped by some humourist, who claimed that the station commander concerned had received a message from the station master of Sonapat railway station thanking him for the flypast!

The presence of birds was a continuing flight safety hazard. It took its toll the next year when a MiG-21 flying just behind us in the supersonic block ingested a bird, causing its engine to flame out. The pilot, a young Flying Officer, very smartly pulled clear and ejected safely a bare minute before Rashtrapati Bhawan. The flypast went

through as planned and we only learnt about the ejection after we landed back at base.

Weather forecasting by its very nature is an inexact science, and the January weather in and around the flypast area was often uncertain. In 1970, I had taken 10 Hunters to Halwara to fly the Hunter block from that base. The final decision to cancel the entire flypast reached us as we were in the cockpit about to start engines. Two hours later we were cleared to return to base, flying almost the planned flyypast route! With my squadron relocating to Pathankot in 1971, my participation in the R-Day flypasts ceased.

Then, in the mid-1970s, I was instructed to join five other gallantry awardees from the other two services as the MoD had decided to 'showcase' some of the Indian war heroes as part of the R-Day parade. It was my first opportunity to actually observe the function, seated 'to attention' in an open jeep. On one rehearsal, just after passing the saluting base, our jeep broke down. Fortunately, the media personnel present were slow to spot and report on three middle-aged senior officers pushing the vehicle to one side and then hot-footing it across the lawns to the CV Mess in search of (liquid) refreshment! For the next rehearsal we found that a standby jeep was now added to our tiny convoy of two!



Hunters over India Gate rehearsing for the R-Day flypast, now part of the IAF's lore