

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...



Then: the HPT-32

Double century at the AFA

On 16 December 2017, No 200 PC (Pilots Course) graduated from the Air Force Academy (AFA) in Hyderabad. To commemorate this landmark figure, the AFA intends to bring out a commemorative publication and has requested inputs from air veterans.

I share a year of birth with the IAF (1932) and, with the passage of time, find myself today as the oldest living ex-commandant of the AFA. My own association with the AFA is threefold: as a flight cadet in 1951-52, as a QFI in 1955-57 and as the commandant in 1983-85.

The genesis of pilot training in our air force can be traced back to World War II

(1939-45). It must be recalled that, for its first 15 years (1932-47), the IAF was a limb of the RAF and served Allied needs. It was the advent of the war that necessitated a rapid expansion of pilot training; commissions were offered to Indians in the RIAF/ IAFVR for the first time. 50 regular/ad hoc pilot training courses were conducted in UK/SA and at FTEs (Flying -Training Establishments) set up at some of the near – 200 emergency airfields constructed in undivided India. Our pioneering Indian pilots benefited greatly from the skills and knowledge gained in air operations both in India and overseas. This experience was vital in building up the IAF post Independence.

The process of indigenisation of Indian military air power can be said to have commenced with No. 51 PC which commenced their ground training at ITW (Initial Training Wing) Coimbatore in October 1947 and thereafter at EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) at Jodhpur. This expanded into No 2 AFA which handled odd-numbered pilot courses while No 1 AFA at Ambala trained even-numbered pilot courses. I joined No 58 PC in early 1951 for our (then) 18-month flying training on Tiger Moth (Basic) and Harvard (Advanced) aircraft. In mid-1951, as part of the policy of relocating all non-operational training down south, No. 1

AFA moved to Begumpet where 30 of us were commissioned on 30 August 1952 by AVM Subroto Mukherjee, then DCAS. Thereafter, as and when needs of the air force expanded, additional FTEs were established at Bidar, Allahabad and flying clubs to augment output. In 1970-71, the present and permanent AFA Hyderabad was set up and all officer-branch training (other than technical training) was centralised under one roof commencing with No. 107 PC.

When I took over as commandant in 1983, our air force faced a major training problem. The HT-2 basic flying trainer had

been phased out and the promised HPT-32 was still two years away. We had no choice but to carry out the IAF's first ever direct basic pilot training on jets (Kirans) of which we had no experience. In fact, in the 1960s, the RAF had experimented with direct basic jet flying training on Jet Provost aircraft but abandoned it as being ruinously expensive with a wastage rate of over 40%. To maintain strict flying standards, our own wastage rates for Nos. 132 to 134 PCs was a shade over 33% but the affected trainees had options for navigator training or the other two services if ex-NDA. The first prototype

HPT-32 arrived at AFA on completion of my tenure in 1985.

It is now 32 years since I left the IAF but, being co-located with the AFA in retirement, I never fail to receive an invitation to the bi-annual GP (Graduation Parade) from the Academy which now conducts basic pilot training on Swiss Pilatus PC 7 trainers. In my 86th year, it is not always convenient to attend but when I do, I am happy to meet commandants who were pupil pilots/new flying instructors during my time and whose efforts collectively contribute to the double century at the AFA.



Now: the Pilatus PC-7 Mk. II of the IAF (photo: Angad Singh)