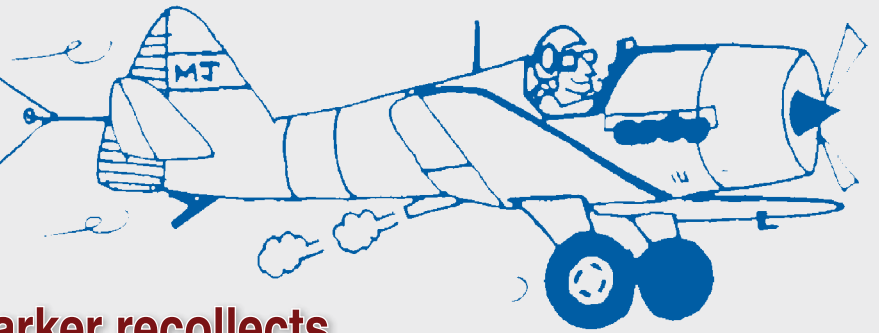


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

An Exchange of Wings

As they mature and grow, most effective organisations develop their own traditions. Our air force, now in its 87th year (like this writer), grew out of the RAF, into the RIAF and finally into an independent IAF. It initially adopted many policies and procedures from its mother – service and thereafter, with experience, developed its own. Unlike policy and procedure which is normally reduced to writing, tradition is more informal and generally passed down from one generation to another, its longevity being dependant upon its value. As a young flight cadet in 1951-52, I learned about one of them pertaining to ‘exchange of wings’. Here is the story.

My co-pupil (Jaypee) and I were from the same college, were in the same batch for our selection/medical boards, were selected for the same pilots’ course and were pupils of the same flying instructor, Navroze Lalkaka. ‘Lally’, as he was known to his peers, was an absolute gem of an officer, gentleman, pilot and teacher. His USP was undoubtedly his love of flying; he inculcated this attribute in both of us while teaching us its skills. For 18 months we benefitted from his patient dedication to the imparting of skills, knowledge and attitude both inside and outside the cockpit.

As our graduation neared, we learned from our seniors that, on receiving our ‘wings’ we should gift them to our flying instructor who in turn would pin his ‘old’ wings on us. This exchange of wings was a symbol of gratitude and respect quite in line with the tradition of our guru-shishya relationship. On 30 August 1952, on the tarmac of Begumpet airfield, 30 of us from No. 58 Pilots Course were commissioned and received our wings from Air Vice Marshal Subroto Mukherjee the then DCAS. After the parade was over, Jaypee and I marched up to Flt Lt Lalkaka, handed our wings over to him, after which he pulled



out two used wings from his pocket and pinned them on us. This private little ceremony was observed by my parents (who had flown down for the POP) and a specially-invited young lady (now my wife of over 63 years). Lally explained the significance to them,

Three years later, as a flying instructor myself, I continued this tradition with my pupils. As the years passed I gradually learned more about the practice of this custom among fliers around the world. During *Ex Shiksha* in 1963 we exercised with three other air forces, being the RAF, RAAF and USAF. I was then the flight commander in a Hunter squadron based in Palam co-located with an F-100F squadron of the USAF. The USAF offered a familiarisation sortie in the Super Sabre and I was delighted to be ‘detailed’ to accept it. I was taken up by my counterpart and thoroughly enjoyed my very first experience of a re-heat engine and going supersonic in level flight. The next day the IAF returned the gesture and I took the same pilot up in the Hunter T.Mk.66. On landing we exchanged wings and trophies in the presence of both commanding officers.

While on a flying course in the USA in 1965, I had occasion to exchange wings with my instructor there. In 1980 while attending a course in the UK I had the opportunity for familiarisation flights in the Hawk and the Harrier T.4 in Germany; we pilots

exchanged wings.

After an informal meeting at the RCDS, I received an invitation from the Israeli air attaché in London to lunch in his embassy. Though it involved no flying, we had a most useful exchange at the end of which I presented him our IAF wings. He immediately removed the wings from his uniform and presented them to me. I may add that, at that point of time, we were yet to recognise Israel!

As the Commandant of our Air Force Academy in 1983-85 I ensured that this tradition was made known to the pilot trainers and trainees. As to whether it still exists, I do not know. I sincerely hope that it continues as it is a small professional gesture that promotes understanding, friendship and goodwill, not only between individuals and organisations but also, by extension, between countries.

Wheeling Down Memory Lane

As a teenager in the 1940s, I received my first driving lessons in my father’s Ford Prefect, but of course was never sent solo. Like most of the youth of my generation, my individual mode of mobility was the bicycle. It served me through school, college, 18 months as a flight cadet and thereafter 12 months as a Pilot Officer in my first unit, No 7 Squadron on Vampire aircraft 1953-54. I used to gaze with admiration and envy at the line-up

of Harley Davidsons, Triumphs, Indians, Royal Enfields and Matchless motor cycles of my seniors parked behind our flight office alongside my cycle. In 1953, as a newly promoted Flying Officer on my 21st birthday (with generous help from home) I took possession of a 3.5 hp BSA Golden Flash motor cycle. History does repeat itself as, on our son's 21 birthday (40 years ago), we also gifted him a Yezdi motor cycle.

My BSA served me well through my bachelor days and first year of marriage. In 1957 we acquired the first of three pre-owned cars that kept us mobile for the next 15 years. It was a six-year old, four door Morris Minor bought in Hyderabad (APX 2008) on which my wife got her driving license and then took over the family driving. The next was a four-year old Fiat 1100 from Delhi (DLE 2538) whose diplomatic number plate helped me out in one or two encounters with the traffic

police in no-parking areas (pun intended!). The third was a two-year old Ambassador from Lucknow (UPD 6868) which 'saw action' in Pathankot in the 1971 Indo-Pak war and which, in 1973 stayed in the family as it passed on to my young brother as his first wheels.

That same year we bought the first of five new cars which were to keep us on the road for the next 45 years. It was an Ambassador from Coonoor which stayed with us for a shade over 17 years. This period covered the end of my air force years (AOC J & K 1985-86) and a decade of post-IAF activities in Mumbai and Hyderabad. With final retirement in our home in Secunderabad in the 1990s, we acquired our first Maruti 800, replaced later by its air-conditioned model and followed by the Wagon R. In 2009 we purchased our present car, the Maruti Ritz which, unarguably is the best of our eight cars. Though now nine years old, with under 22k on the clock, we are reluctant to change

it for a newer model. For me personally over the years, the wheel has come full circle from two wheels to three wheels (tricycle undercarriage of all the aircraft I flew for 35 years) to four wheels and now back to two wheels as I have just had my very first ride in a wheel chair!

An update: Regular readers of this AAA column will recollect my last anecdote titled 'Reflections on a Blue Shirt' which incidentally received some heart-warming responses from friend and stranger alike. Two responses from my family might be of follow-up interest.

Till she read the article, my wife had no idea that a 66 year old, faded, frayed shirt was in my wardrobe. She unearthed it, declared it totally unhygienic and promptly disposed of it. She then kindly thanked me for solving her gift problem for my forthcoming 86th birthday. (My guess is that it will be a new blue shirt and not a new blue car!).

The Saving of Chander

December of every year takes me back to 1971 and the Indo-Pak war. I was then a wing commander in command of No.20 Squadron equipped with Hunter Mk.56A aircraft based at Pathankot and tasked primarily with counter air operations. My pilots log book reminds me of the sorties I personally led attacking PAF air bases at Peshawar, Mianwali, Murid, Chaklala, the Attock Oil Refinery plus close air support in Chhamb and Poonch sectors. To this list should have been added the PAF forward airfield at Chander; this anecdote will relate a little known story.

In the first week of December 1971, Air Cmde LM Katre who had been sent to control air operations at Pathankot, asked Wg Cdr Johnny Greene the CO of No.2 Squadron with Gnats at Amritsar and myself to a confidential briefing in his office. He had been informed that the PAF airfield at Chander had to be neutralised on a date and a time to be notified by higher authorities. My squadron had been tasked to bomb the runway at Chander with eight aircraft each carrying 2 x

1000 lb penetration bombs. Tactically, in the relatively short distance to Chander, we were required to climb to 10,000 ft, drop speed, get into line-astern about 1000 yards apart and deliver the bombs in a steep dive along the length of the runway. Since we would be highly vulnerable, four Gnats would give us top cover from Amritsar, which I would overfly enroute the target and cover us for four minutes over Chander before they would have to return to their base. For security purposes this plan was referred to as Mission 548 and restricted to a few need-to-know individuals.

Johnny and I carried out a mutual briefing covering communication, codes, tactics and I assured him that I would be over Amritsar 15 minutes before TOT (Time on Target). Midway through the second week we received the date and TOT (1630) for Mission 548 which gave my ground staff just enough time to provide 8(+1 standby) aircraft armed as required. I had obtained some very basic intelligence on the target (R/W orientation, elevation, layout etc) but I had a good professional team both in the air and on the ground. As we taxied out

and neared our own R/W at 1600 hrs, I asked for stream take-off in pairs but was told abruptly to 'Hold position'. I was deeply concerned as we had nine aircraft sitting on the taxi track though two local Gnats were capping the airfield for our take-off. Then came an authoritative voice on the radio, 'Cecil, Katre here, return to your dispersal where I will be waiting for you'. We taxied back rapidly and over a cup of tea he explained that he had just received a flash message to say that high level cease-fire talks were in progress and meanwhile no offensive actions across the border were to take place after 1600 hrs.

In his book 'In the Ring and Standing' Air Cmde Kaiser Tufail of the PAF paid a compliment to No. 20 Squadron with particular reference to our strike on Murid on 8 December where the PAF lost five aircraft on the ground. Though our RV (rendezvous) with the Gnats over Amritsar never took place, on the suggestion of my pilots soon after the war, we, along with our families, drove down to Amritsar, made our obeisance at the Golden Temple and gave thanks, though tinged with some regret at the last minute cancellation of Mission 548 which saved Chander.