

## Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



## Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects



### Type Trainers

Depending upon the context in which it is used, the term 'trainers' can refer to people or to specialist sports shoes or to flight simulators! Fliers world-wide however know it as the generic term used for two-seater aircraft utilised for pilot training ranging from basic to type-trainers of high-performance, single-seat combat aircraft. By design, a trainer aircraft seating can be either tandem or side-by-side, with the pupil generally seated in the front cockpit in the former, or in the left hand seat in the latter.

My generation's association with IAF trainer aircraft began in 1951 in Ambala with basic flying training in the fabric-covered, tandem-seating biplane, the Tiger

Moth, in which the pupil flew from the rear cockpit! In the advanced stage of pilot training we flew from the front cockpit of the all-metal Harvard. Post-commission we moved to the CTU to convert on to the Tempest which had no type-trainer. We were therefore given four dual sorties from the front cockpit of the Spitfire Mk 1X – the trainer derivative of the famous 'Battle of Britain' fighter aircraft. In comparison the Tempest was a far more powerful, heavy and difficult plane to fly; we survived but alas our naval aviator course mate did not. This was the end of our training on piston-engined, tail-wheel aircraft as the Tempest was soon grounded and we moved to a squadron equipped with the very first jets of the IAF.

The Vampire type-trainer was still in the future hence we were briefed thoroughly and, after a ground-run, were launched solo in an aircraft where, for the very first time, the engine, was behind us and we were seated in the nose of the aircraft; we coped! The next aircraft was the Toofani which also did not have a type-trainer but now, with over two years flying experience on Vampire jets, we converted more easily onto this French aircraft with its toe-brakes, wing-tip tanks and higher C of G. At FIS (Flying Instructors' School), we learned to fly from the rear cockpit of the HT-2 and Harvard trainers as well as learning how to teach. As QFIs at the Academy, we imparted knowledge and flying skills to ab initio pilot

trainees on these two aircraft, along with the Prentice, which was the very first side-by-side seating aircraft I had ever flown.

Back to squadron life and ten consecutive years on the Hunter which had a very professionally designed trainer variant with side-by-side seating. A good deal of my instructional flying was from the right hand seat especially at the (Hunter) OTU which I raised and commanded from 1966–69. During this period I also had the privilege of being taken up for an air experience sortie in a visiting Canberra by one of the IAF's legends who happened to be my then station commander. As a station commander myself, I inducted the tandem

## The Tempest in India

On occasion, a reader's response to these anecdotes, spawns another. An e-mail from a Canadian national, of Indian origin, informed me that a granduncle of his (whom he had never met) had lost his life in a Tempest aircraft crash of the IAF in the 1950s. Having read about my link with the Tempest aircraft 65 years ago, he gave me the family name which rang a bell. His relative had been a course ahead of me and died in a Tempest accident in Pune in 1953.

The Tempest IIA served the RIAF / IAF from 1946 to 1953. On 15 August 1947, (then) Sqd Ldr Arjan Singh, DFC had led the first (and last) flypast of 12 Tempests



seater Polish Iskra trainer into the IAF and which, along with the Kiran trainer, we used for both advanced and applied stages of pilot training. As the AOC of an air base for MiG, I did my Type 69 conversion with duals on the MiG-21UMF and as Commandant of the Air Force Academy flew the prototype HPT-32 trainer.

The non-IAF trainers I flew, as a pupil or for familiarisation, included the F-100F Super Sabre during Exercise *Shiksha* with the USAF in Palam in 1963 (my first experience of a rehear engine); the T-39A Sabreliner in the USA while on course there in 1965 and the BAe Hawk and Harrier T.4 in the UK in 1980. The last two trainer aircraft I flew in the Air Force were the MiG-23UM from Leh and the Jaguar T-2 from Ambala where it all started 35 years earlier! My log book tells me that 35 per cent of my flying hours are as a 'trainer' but, as all (old) pilots know, 100 per cent was experiential learning!

over Red Fort when our national flag was unfurled for the first time. The aircraft was used in the offensive air support role during the Kashmir war of 1948-49. It was a single seat, single-engined, fighter bomber and our last piston-engined ground attack aircraft before the advent of jets in our Air Force. It was a heavy, powerful and difficult aircraft to fly, as we young newly commissioned pilot officers were to learn at CTU, in late 1952.

The gap between the Harvard trainer and the Tempest was 'bridged' for us by four dual sorties in the Spitfire Mk. IX – the trainer variant of the Spitfire family. The Centaurus engine fitted on the Tempest IIA was prone to engine cuts owing to connecting-rod failures. Midway through our Tempest conversion, owing to engine failure, one course mate successfully force landed on the airfield. A week later this writer was lucky to bail out from another aircraft on fire in the air. A few days later

a third coursemate (a naval aviator), was not so lucky and went down with his aircraft. Similar incidents/accidents were reported from No 4 Squadron in Pune and No 10 Squadron in Barrackpore. This led to grounding of the aircraft, termination of our training and posting to squadrons equipped with the Vampire jets.

In retirement, some years ago, while researching for an article on Indian membership of the *Caterpillar Club*, I requested for and was provided with full flight safety data by Air HQ. The information pertaining to Tempest was sparse but revealing in that, in every fatal

accident, the pilot had gone down with the aircraft with parachute unused. This suggests that there was some basic design flaw that obstructed emergency exit in the air. In fact, the only recorded successful bail out was mine in 1952. However, the family of the late Wg Cdr Sydney Noronha, MVC informed me that he had bailed out from a Tempest safely during the Kashmir operations. In those early years, perhaps records were not maintained too carefully and it is possible that some accidents had not been included in the data given to me. My individual written requests for information to our very senior pilots on this subject, elicited the following response from Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh, DFC (later Marshal of the Indian Air Force) in his letter dated 21 July 1994:

"I am sorry I have to draw a blank about the purpose of your letter. I have never used a parachute even in practice. At Cranwell, the theory was that in this field you make a mistake only once. The attitude has much changed with introduction of the ejection mechanism. Before that, one was quite scared of using this last resort. However at lower speeds, forced landing was not too hazardous. You were lucky to get away with it in a Tempest, a difficult aircraft to fly and land and much more to bail out from. I cannot think of anyone else who got away with it in an Irwin parachute in the early days of the IAF".

Though the ejection seat has made this issue obsolete, it is hoped that this brief recap of the Tempest in a nascent air force seven decades ago, will offer some explanatory background to a reader in Canada.