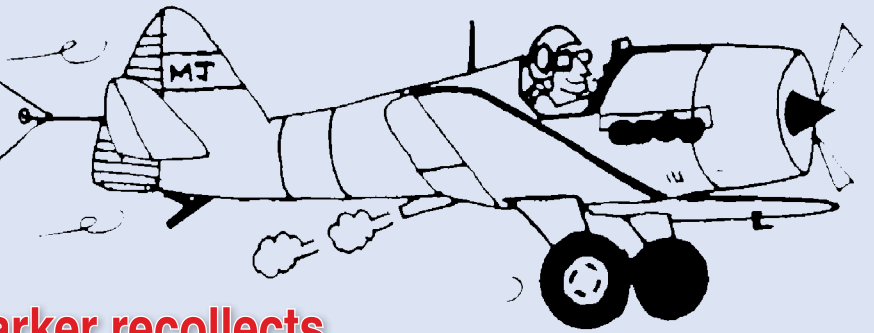


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...



The Learning Curve

IAF Tiger Moth

Every profession has a desired learning curve. The curve itself is a notional graph that plots the progress of knowledge, skills and competencies on one axis against opportunity, time and costs on the other. When knowledge and skills are applied over a period of time, experience is gained which, along with demonstrated performance, should determine levels of employment. In the flying profession, the learning curve is sought to be maintained by periodic training courses, dual checks, simulators, examining boards, categorisation/ratings and exercises. Every military aviator has a pilot's log book that records details of each sortie flown. It is a de facto record of experience and thus,

also serves as a written version of a particular learning curve. To recheck some facts for a recent article, I unearthed my old log book, which, of course, has had no entry for the past 33 years ever since I left the air force. I very soon lost myself in reliving some of the highlights of my own learning curve in the IAF.

My very first flight as a teenaged flight cadet, was an 'air experience' sortie in the rear cockpit of the fabric-covered, piston-engined biplane, the Tiger Moth in 1951. My last recorded flight was, as a 53-year old AVM (AOC J & K) on a familiarisation flight in the front cockpit of the twin-engined Jaguar T2 in 1986. Between these two entries were the records

of 20 other types covering piston/jet, single/multi-engined, fixed/rotary wing aircraft amounting to 4000 flying hours. I recalled my bail-out from a blazing Tempest in 1952, transition from pistons to jets (Vampires and Toofanis) and to the learning experience of actually using these platforms to fire rockets, guns and drop bombs plus air-to-air gunnery. An unexpected posting to a communication squadron enabled me to gain experience on twin-engined aircraft, being Devons and Dakotas. Some years later, while undergoing a training course in the USA, this experience was most useful in flying the T-39 twin-jet aircraft. As a QFI, I relived my great personal delight in sending my first pupil solo on the HT-2, in 1955.



Teaching is a great learning experience and certainly sharpens the learning curve.

I spent ten consecutive years on the Hunter, first as a flight Commander, next as the CO/CI in raising the IAF's first OTU in Jamnagar (1966-69) and then back to No.20 Squadron as the CO (1969-72). This was an eventful period some of the highlights of which include the safe landing of a Hunter with three outboard tanks one of which was a live hang-up napalm bomb. Others were, ferrying of a Hunter from the UK to India and being privileged to take up the very first Indian lady to fly in an IAF jet- a lady doctor in 1970. The high point was undoubtedly all the counter air strike sorties in the 1971 Indo-Pak war in which the demonstrated performance of my squadron was superb.

As a station commander (1975-77) I had the job satisfaction of inducting 50 Polish jet Iskra's into our air force and then as the AOC of a MiG airbase, had the learning opportunity of converting onto

and flying various marks of this jet fighter in 1977-79. While attending a course in the UK in 1980, I was again fortunate to fly familiarisation sorties on the Hawk and the Harrier. As Commandant of our Air Force Academy, we coped with the non-availability of a basic trainer aircraft by carrying out the IAF's very first all-jet basic pilot training on the Kiran for five courses. My post air force professions had their own learning curves which, thanks to my experience in yesterdays air force, were much easier to master. Finally, let me assure you dear reader that creative retirement also has its own learning curve!

The OTU : A Legacy

On 1 October 1966 the IAF established its first Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Jamnagar with 24 Hunter aircraft (four trainers and 20 fighters) drawn from the six Hunter Mk.56 equipped squadrons, as was also the ground equipment and most of its human resources. The OTU was given

a dual role: 'training' for which it came under HQ WAC at Palam and 'operations' for which it came under an ad hoc HQ WI (Western India) in Poona. On the same date I reported on posting and promotion to wing commander rank to raise the new unit as its first Commanding Officer & Chief Instructor. HQ WAC asked me to draft its Training Directive which I did; it was approved in toto.

It took a few weeks to obtain the allotted resources, create the syllabus, get organised and commence ground and flying training. I had some experienced QFIs, a few staff pilots, 16 pupils and technical personnel most of whom had some experience with the aircraft; extensive flying commenced. In 1967 tension rapidly built up in the Kutch area and ground forces were moved to the borders. HQ WI immediately stopped all our flying training, we mounted an ORP (Operational Readiness Platform), were assigned targets and prepared for offensive air operations along with No.10



Squadron's Maruts which were co-located. All non-essential flying was curtailed to conserve flying hours. Our ORP was in tented accommodation close to two open blast pens and controlled by our local SU (Signals Unit) by landline. All eligible pilots readily volunteered for ORP duties in the hope of a scramble and the surety of a dawn/dusk patrol flight. Ground training for the pupil pilots continued but, when the prime activity of an air base (i.e. flying) ceases, in the unnatural silence that prevails, 'unemployed' pilots get in everyone's way and time hangs heavy.

It was during this waiting period that the Flt Cdr/CFI brought in a scrabble set and introduced this word-building game into the crew room. It proved very popular and soon loud arguments on word spellings, meanings and usage rent the air in the flight office and the ORP. Personal dictionaries were produced in support of or attack on words both within and outside our normal vocabularies. It must be a rare experience for a flight fund to acquire a dictionary but eventually one was purchased and accepted as sole authority to settle disputes! After a few days, tension reduced, normal flying recommenced and in 1968 the OTU went on to win the HQ WAC ISWM Arjuna trophy. Meanwhile, the new passion for scrabble transferred to our homes and families. Many a pleasant Sunday/holiday morning was spent in a scrabble session followed by beer and lunch in various homes, including the CO's as his wife became an enthusiastic participant as well.



The 53 year old OTU, having been equipped with the Hunter, followed by the MiG-21, now operates the Hawk trainer, is renamed as the HOFTU (Hawk Operational Flying Training Unit), based at Kalaikunda and has spawned a clone in Bidar. In 2012 the (then) CO very kindly sent me a framed photograph of a MiG-21 being flown by 'The Young Ones', was deeply appreciative of the first OTU diary (1966-69) but a little puzzled by the report of 'scrabble sessions between scrambles from

the ORP' in 1967. I explained the meaning and the context and he had a good laugh.

My wife and I continue to play the game twice a day and I estimate we have had several thousand such 'vocabulistic' encounters. However, having been married for 63 years (to the same lady) I have learned that, in the interest of domestic peace and harmony, no record of the results should be maintained nor referred to! For us, the game of scrabble is certainly one happy legacy of the OTU.