



Of Hawks and Harriers



Hawk T.1A of the RAF

A recent news item (*see Vayu III/2016*), pertaining to phase-out of the Harrier aircraft from our Navy, took me back 36 years to a chain of unexpected events that led to my first and only flight in that type. In 1980 I was attending a course at the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS), London. Among my British colleagues was an engineer from British Aerospace (BAe, now BAE Systems). Over a friendly get-to-know-each-other beer, he asked me how I felt about the Indian government's interest in the possible acquisition of the BAe Hawk and Harrier aircraft? Since they were both proven platforms in service with the RAF and RN, there was no doubting their utility. As to their suitability in meeting our needs, I felt flying experience on type would be of help.

Coincidentally, a few weeks later, I received a call from our Air Advisor in London informing me that four familiarisation sorties on the Hawk had been offered to the Indian Air Force. Air HQ had advised that since I was already in

London, medically fit and in current flying status, I could carry out the sorties and for which period I would be treated as being on flying duties. Furthermore, since I had earlier inducted the Polish Iskra trainer into the Air Force, I was also required to submit a report regarding suitability of the Hawk for advanced and applied stages of flying training. I readily accepted the offer provided RCDS would permit me to do so during the Easter break; this was immediately agreed to.

On 17 April 1980, accompanied by the Deputy Air Advisor, I reported to RAF Valley and was delighted to meet up again with an erstwhile RAF student at our own Staff College Wellington in 1974, where I had then been a DS (Air); he was to fly me. After a thorough briefing and kitting I had a most enjoyable and educative sortie as he left most of the actual flying to me. Two days later we relocated to RAF Brawdy where I was able to carry out some live firing from another Hawk including both rockets and guns. I duly submitted my report to the Air Advisor.

Among the close personal friends I had made at RCDS was an RAF colleague who, like me, had a Hunter background. He had raised and commanded the RAF's first Harrier squadron in 1969. I shared with him my experience of the Hawk, which he had yet to fly! During the college land tour of Europe in July, both of us were in the same group at a NATO air base in Germany where his old squadron was now based. He was offered a sortie in their Harrier T.4 but very kindly asked the RCDS Commandant (an RAF AVM) if the sortie could possibly be offered to the Air Commodore from India? The Commandant had no objection and I certainly had none! Time did not permit me to take permission from India, so I immediately got briefed, kitted and quite enjoyed my very first experience of V/STOL flight in Harrier T.4 913 captained by a Flt Lt Harris. That evening my forex reserves were severely depleted, as I had to stand drinks all round at the bar! On return to London I explained the situation to our Air Advisor. He was a close friend but felt



RAF Harrier T.4 trainer, similar to the one flown by the author (photo: Mike Freer)

that since the flight was a *fait accompli*, I might consider rendering a report on what American aviators term as a ‘dollar ride’!

Whether my report(s) actually reached any senior decision maker, I still do not know but was happy to learn that in 1983 the Sea Harrier was inducted into our Navy and that today the Hawk is in service with both the Indian Air Force as well as the Navy.

A Call and Recall

In all professions the acquisition of skills and knowledge depend largely upon the quality of instruction imparted. It is however, only when these attributes are actually applied in practice, that experience is gained and self-learning commences. Perhaps, the training and education in our Air Force is as good an example as any other. As pilot trainees in 1951-52 we underwent 18 months of learning, both in the air and on the ground. Most of our instructors had served in the RAF/RIAF and transferred their learning and experience to us as future pilots, officers and gentlemen of the IAF.

Learning to fly was a challenge and great fun but ground subjects were less so. The syllabus of the latter included a few lectures on ‘Customs of the Services,’ a manual by a Gp Capt Stradling of the RAF, for which it was a definitive guide. Our fledgling Air

Force was still in the process of indigenising our own customs, hence, in the interim, continued to follow those laid down in this book. We were taught about the significance of ‘Dining-in Nights’ and had one every week in our own Flight Cadets Mess. We also learned the social requirement of calling upon the Commanding Officer (CO) of the unit one was posted to. It laid down procedure for making an appointment, dress, duration and other protocols, which included discreetly leaving two visiting cards!

After graduation and completion of fighter conversion (all on piston-engined aircraft), three of us coursemates were posted as Pilot Officers to the very first squadron of the IAF equipped with jet aircraft (Vampires). Jet trainers were still three years away so we were launched solo after detailed ground briefing. We learned to cope and built up our individual expertise because every sortie was a self-learning experience. On the ground our Adjutant (a future Air Marshal and Chairman of HAL) made us print visiting cards (no ranks for pilot officers, only ‘Mr!’) and arranged a date/time for us to make a call on our Squadron Commander.

Our CO (Sqn Ldr GKJ) was a thorough gentleman, soft spoken and avuncular in

nature. We were still immobile and yet to acquire bicycles, hence walked to his residence anxiously clutching our newly printed visiting cards! At exactly 7 pm we pressed the doorbell and were welcomed by our CO who promptly relieved us of the visiting cards, served us drinks and snacks personally and got to know us socially outside the work environment. At exactly 7.30 pm (after exchanging meaningful glances with each other) we rose, thanked him for his hospitality and prepared to exit. He politely escorted us out, thanked us for coming and then, with a twinkle in his eye, informed us that the ‘call’ was over and ushered us back into the house where his wife had a delicious home cooked dinner awaiting us. We had a most enjoyable, informal and relaxed evening at the end of which our CO dropped us back in his car.

The next morning, in response to his query, we assured the Adjutant that we had got up and exited after the prescribed 30 minutes. He seemed satisfied and our CO had a quiet, conspiratorial smile for three young officers who had learned a great deal from his thoughtful and kind gesture, an example of experiential learning we would adapt and put into practice ourselves in future years.

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