

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects what was

Lost and Found

The flight cadets of No 58 Pilots Course (1951-1952) did their flying training on the Tiger Moth (Basic) and the Harvard (Advanced) in Ambala and Begumpet. As we neared the end of our 18-month training period around mid-1952, in the solo pilot–navigation phase strict standards (a 40% attrition rate) had reduced our numbers to 30. On 2 May 1952, after the first sortie of the day had landed, one Harvard aircraft was missing and was soon declared ‘overdue’. There was no radio contact with the pilot, Flight Cadet Bhatt. Search aircraft overflew his planned flight path but found no trace of aircraft or pilot. Communication technology was still in its infancy and we were all deeply concerned about our coursemate. After several hours a message was received on the police net to say that a *hawai jahaz* had landed near town of Banswada (110 km away) and, much to our collective relief, the *kaptaan* had walked to a nearby village. Along with another cadet, I was detailed to accompany the rescue party led by our CTO (Chief Technical Officer).

Four hours later, near sunset, we observed a crowd on the side of the road and then spotted a Harvard that had done a ‘wheels-up’ landing in a field. Apart from bent propellers and a scraped under-surface, it appeared relatively undamaged. The local police constable escorted us to a nearby village where we found Saligram Bhatt, draped in a white shawl, seated regally in the *choupal* and treated like royalty! It transpired that a visit from a ‘high-up’ official had been expected, hence our hero’s unorthodox arrival did not come as too much of a surprise! We thanked the *tehsildar* and local inhabitants for looking after him so well and left our IAF police to safeguard the aircraft.

On the night drive back to Begumpet, we learned from Saligram that cloud build-

up along his flight path had obscured his ground vision and, being unable to read his map, he was soon thoroughly lost. He had no radio contact with anyone, had been airborne for over two hours and was running low on fuel. He (wisely) decided to put the aircraft down while he still had engine power. He recced a field, made two trial approaches and then belly-landed without damage to property or persons. After the *tehsildar* gave him the name of the town, he discovered he was well off his planned flight path and was understandably apprehensive of the consequences. In the event, the air force authorities attributed his navigational error, which led to the accident, to inexperience and we were happy that he received his wings and commission with the rest of us a few weeks later. Post-commission he did his twin-engine conversion on Dakotas and was then posted to a multi-engine squadron equipped with Liberator bombers. I would like to imagine that our Saligram was much relieved to find that the crew of the Liberator included a full time navigator!

Unfortunately, Fg Offr Bhatt developed medical problems which became serious enough to cut short his flying career and for him to be medically boarded out of

service. His separation, though a loss to the air force, was a gain for civil aviation and its legal fraternity. Today, Professor Saligram Bhatt is the JNU Professor of Aerospace Law, Visiting Professor at NALSAR (Air University), and a retired Deputy Director General of Civil Aviation, having spent ten years as an ATC Officer in the air traffic control centres in Delhi and Mumbai.

He might have got lost 65 years ago but certainly found his true vocation in life. Way to go Saligram – *shabash!*

(Prof S Bhatt can be reached at bhattsaligram@yahoo.co.in)



Prof S Bhatt (R) with the author at Secunderabad, April 2017



Harvards such as this served as advanced trainers in the 1950s (photo: Angad Singh)