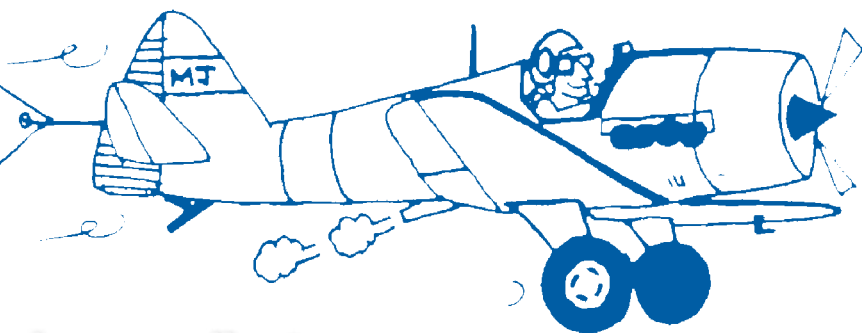


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

Idris Bhai – II

The preceding piece, titled 'Idris Bhai', was penned two and a half years ago in my AAA series, and was much appreciated by ACM and Mrs Latif; in fact, he thereafter signed off his e-mails to me as 'Idris Bhai'! In the recent past, both have passed into history but remain in the memories of those of us who were privileged to have enjoyed their friendship. I was delighted to learn that a commemorative book on this unique couple is being planned and am happy to update the previous article.

In retirement, my wife and I shared a comfortable, relaxed relationship with the Latifs in Hyderabad meeting frequently at functions, homes and kept in regular touch by voice and text. A pot-pourri of some personal recollections follows.

At a Christmas dinner party in our home, ACM Latif reminisced with great feeling about a close air force friend of his in the early 1950s who took him to the annual Christmas midnight carol service, where he greatly enjoyed the singing and the ambience.

When my book 'Airlooms' was published in 2014, I arranged for a complimentary copy to be delivered on his birthday. Both of them were appreciative while Idris Latif was most encouraging by voicing his opinion that, as it contained some nuggets of air force history, it should be in every IAF station library.

A newly bereaved widower (close air force friend and colleague) had arranged a memorial service for his late wife in the church, I am a member of and invited the Latifs who immediately accepted. My wife



Air Cde CV Parker, Ms Bilkees Latif, Ms Shirley Parker and ACM IH Latif at Air Force Station Adampur, 1978

and I were requested to 'look after' them. They required no looking after but after the service, spent a great deal of time walking around the Intach building and putting questions I was hard put to answer! They then both sat quietly for some time in meditation before leaving.

Despite their age, they attended almost every function they were invited to and we admired their remarkable devotion to each other, stamina and patience. I recollect one prolonged Air Force Association meeting when ACM Latif, in his closing address, highlighted some of the difficulties he underwent. He looked directly and fondly at his wife and said, "Dear, I could not have coped without your help and support"; a truly admirable gesture.

At a lunch party in their home, the topic had turned to stress. I shared the story of an air force daughter (whose father Idris knew well) who, at a period of stress in her personal life, found great serenity by meditating alone in a Gurdwara; she just happened to belong to another religion. Mrs Latif related a somewhat similar experience when she visited the Tirumala Temple in Tirupati and expressed the wonder of so many different religious establishments producing a similar outcome regardless of religious identity.

When the Latifs learnt that the Parkers were singing with Hyderabad Choral Society and book reading with The Little Theatre, they demanded to know as to why they had not been invited! They were a wonderful audience sitting in unreserved chairs in the very informal ambience of our performances.

On one of our frequent visits to our daughter and family in London, I met a dapper, spry 90 year old retired officer of the British army named Dick Channer. When he learned that I was from the Indian Air Force, he told me he had met and had lunch on a special occasion with 'the IAF governor of Bombay' in the 1980s and that, if I knew him, I should convey his regards. I did so via a casual e-mail; Idris Latif responded immediately to say that he did not remember the name but did remember the occasion, and that I should kindly reciprocate the good wishes; a gentleman to the core.

In 1980, while at the Farnborough air show in the UK, ACM Latif and I were standing together when a gentleman approached us to greet him. I stepped back to give them privacy but my CAS pulled me back to introduce me to the PAF CAS

who smiled, held out his hand and said he had heard my name. After he left, Idris Latif mentioned that the PAF CAS wanted to know if I was one of the Hunter pilots who had attacked the air base in Peshawar during the 1971 Indo-Pak War. "I told him you had led the strike" said our CAS.

In response to my monthly AAA I would invariably receive an appreciative and encouraging reply from the Latifs. When these became fewer and then stopped, I realised something was amiss. In October 2017 my wife and I were away in London to attend the marriage of our elder grandson. The Latif's son Asgar and our son Kevin have been friends since their student days together at St Stephens. It was through Kevin that he relayed the sad news that Madam Bilkees had passed away. We e-mailed our condolences, but on return were advised against making a personal call as ACM Latif was in no condition to receive visitors. Then last month, we got the news that he too had passed away and joined his wife of 67 years. It is to my regret that, owing to my own indisposition, I was unable to attend either his funeral or the prayer meeting. And so, a well loved, talented couple, who had served both the IAF and the country so proudly, passed into eternity. For my generation, Idris Bhai was a role model par excellence.

Vintage Veteran Voices

Eighty percent of my years in the air force (1951-86) were spent on airfields in various flying assignments. While this gave me great experience of air operations, it also provided me ample opportunities to interact with and learn from personnel of our maintenance and administrative branches without whose support no aircraft could fly. Some of these interactions, regardless of rank or specialisation, developed into friendships of which a few continue in retirement. In my sunset years, it gives me much pleasure to hear from and/or meet up with air veterans of all generations.

In my April column titled 'Cricket in the Forties', the protagonist was a sergeant of the British army of World War II vintage when I was still in school. Among the responses to this article was one from an ex-corporal of the IAF who had authored a book titled 'The Sergeant's Son' published five years ago; he urged me to read it. By good fortune, a friend had a copy and I found the recounting of his childhood and

early years growing up in an air force family, interesting and educative especially as his (late) father was a contemporary of mine. My only disappointment was that his story stopped just before he himself joined the air force. Well done 'Kalu' you have talent and potential which I hope you will use to continue writing. The written records of air veterans add to the (hi)story of the IAF whose primary resource, regardless of the progress of technology, will always be its 'People'.

Three years ago, my wife and I were at the Hyderabad airport in the wee hours of the morning to catch an international flight. The old immigration form had a small sub-section to indicate 'profession' which I had inadvertently left blank. The serious looking, bespectacled, elderly official sitting behind the desk asked me to fill it in, which I did. After perusing the form and my passport closely, he introduced himself as an ex-flight sergeant of the air force, and said he had heard my name. He smiled, put out his hand, diverted waiting passengers to other counters and personally escorted us through Security introducing me with great pride though we had just met! I appreciated his gesture and thanked him warmly as he left us at the transit lounge. It was a humbling experience and we never met up with this air veteran again.

Not long into retirement, I met a very successful businessman, about five years my junior, who proudly prints 'Ex-Sgt' on his personal letterhead! I learned that he had donated generously for the welfare of air force personnel and their families. From his profits, he had built up a Trust Fund which has a substantial total today. Last month, this air veteran came to seek my help in drafting a suitable letter to the Raksha Mantri offering the contents of his Trust Fund to establish educational facilities for the children of our uniformed martyrs. I do not know the outcome of the offer yet, but my friend, I salute you!

And finally we come to the long retired air officer of the logistics branch, settled in Bengaluru and much my senior – a fact he never lets me forget even now! Last month, I called him up to wish him on his 95th birthday and was delighted to hear him chastise me in colourful language for not having contacted him earlier! Our friendship goes back nearly six decades to when we were both students together at the Defence Services Staff College Wellington in 1960. It was really heartening to hear the cheerful voice of this nonagenarian air veteran who I hope will graduate to centurion status in due course.