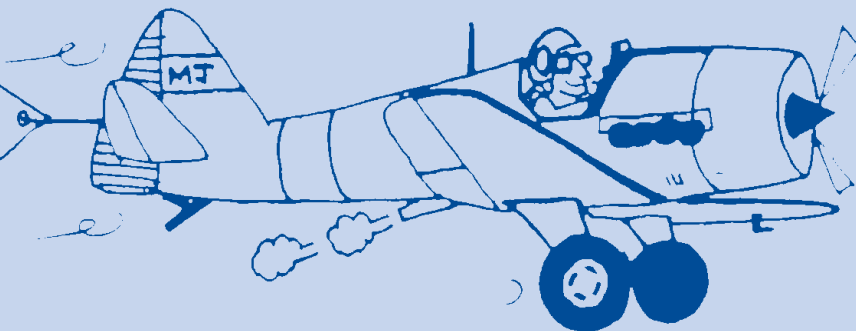


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...



Tribute To A Pathfinder

Our friendship goes back to 1949 when we were both students at the same college in Calcutta, he a 'bong' from Shantiniketan and this writer a 'half-bong' from elsewhere. A year my senior, he was even then very mature, disciplined but somewhat reserved by nature. Yet, he had a quiet sense of humour and was not above joining his more boisterous fellow students in our occasional cutting of classes to watch football matches or pooling our (very restricted) financial resources to enjoy *puchkas/jhaal muri* on the *maidaan* or (during *Durga Puja*) choosing to visit only those *pandals* where the prettiest girls were queued up!

We both appeared for the FPSC entrance exam for the IAF, attended the Air Force Selection Board in Dehra Dun and the Central Medical Establishment in Delhi in the same group and were selected for the same pilot training course at No.1 AFA up north in Ambala.

On a cold winter morning in March 1951 we reported together to the academy and joined 48 other young lads from all over India to form No.58 Pilots Course. Soon after our training commenced, the academy was relocated to Begumpet and we were sent home for a month after which we again travelled together, this time down south to Secunderabad. Our togetherness continued when we found ourselves pupils of the same instructor. Navroze Lalkaka was a gem of a teacher and gentleman who not only taught us how to fly but instilled many soft skills both during and after working hours. My co-pupil's leadership potential led to his being a very popular and successful appointment cadet. He was near the top of our course of 30, which finally graduated on 30 August 1952. Post-commissioning we separated, he to TTW for twin-engine conversion and me to FTW for fighter conversion. Our meetings thereafter were infrequent but we kept in touch and got

news of each other as coursemates do. After marriage we met at course reunions and get-togethers with families.

After tenures in Dakota squadrons, he was selected to convert on to the Canberra twin-engined light jet bomber aircraft. We both commanded squadrons at the same time but at different air bases. Once, during an inter-command exercise, we 'crossed swords in the air' (so to speak) and only discovered in debrief that he was flying the Canberra and I was flying the Hunter – pupils of the same instructor now on opposite sides! With his admirable personal and professional attributes he was posted abroad as our Defence Attache. Post our respective (premature) retirements, he became Secretary of the Tolly Club in Kolkata which I visited frequently on business trips for my company in Mumbai. When his son relocated to Hyderabad, he and his wife were frequent visitors and we enjoyed many family get-togethers in our home and in restaurants.

Five years ago he was diagnosed with cancer and flew here for treatment at the Indo American Cancer Hospital. Throughout, he maintained his calm, cheerful demeanour and rarely missed the annual meetings of the Canberra Club in Pune. Our last personal visit to him was in April when he was bedridden. He overcame his last operation and flew back to Kolkata. On 7 May we received the sad news that he had passed away. A deluge of e-mails and messages poured in from coursemates and many friends for a caring husband, father, officer and gentleman. True to one of the primary roles of the Canberra, my friend Jaypee is now a pathfinder for his coursemates. (It should be the ultimate high spirited Reunion!)

Yesterday's Air Force

The Indian Air Force shares a year of birth (1932) with this ancient aviator. For its first 15 years our air force was a limb of the RAF but, particularly during World War II (1939-1945), our pioneer Indian pilots and technicians acquired skills, knowledge and experience that would equip them later to build an independent IAF post-1947. During the war years this writer was in a Raj-era boarding school, which had a military airfield in close proximity. The daily sight and sound of aircraft made all of us young boys dream of becoming pilots! Post partition our fledgling air force was left with a truncated inventory of aircraft: transports (Dakota), fighters (Spitfire and Tempest), bombers (Liberator) and trainers (Tiger Moth, Harvard, Prentice). Nonetheless it performed admirably in 1948, airlifting our troops into Srinagar and providing offensive air support to our land forces, thus saving Kashmir. As we grew, the first jet aircraft, the British Vampire, was inducted in 1948, the year I completed school and joined college.

By the time we became a Republic (1950) it was clear that, to build up India's primary instrument of military air power, a large-scale induction and training of personnel of all branches and trades, had to be undertaken immediately. Thus it was that in early 1951 I found myself in a pilot's course of over 50 flight cadets at No.1 Air Force Academy in Ambala. Standards were strict and 18 months later only 30 of us received our wings and commission just before the IAF and I marked our 20th birthday(s). In the next 34 years, I moved 19 times on various postings, while acquiring skills and knowledge, making mistakes and learning from them, surviving accidents, raising a family, gaining valuable experience in the air and on the ground, but above all, thoroughly enjoying my flying as 80 per cent of my assignments were at airfields.

In the same period, the IAF developed into a balanced tactical air force with the induction of aircraft and equipment from various sources/countries *viz*: HAL (HT-2, Marut, Kiran, HPT-32, Krishak, Ajeet), France (Ouragan/Toofani, Mystere, Alouette/Chetak, Mirage), UK (Hunter, Canberra, Viscount, Devon, Gnat, Avro, Jaguar), USA (Packet, Sikorsky S-55, Super Constellation, Boeing 737), Canada (Otter, Caribou), Poland (Iskra), and USSR



The 'vintage' MiG-21 was state-of-the-art when the author was in service! (photo: Angad Singh)

(Il-14, Mi-4/8/17/25/35/26, An-12, MiG-21/23/27, Tu-124, Su-7, An-32, Il-76). It is a great tribute to our veteran air warriors of every single branch and trade that they coped effectively with this staggering diversity of airborne platforms and support equipment. 'Jugaad' was developed into a fine science that demonstrated air power successfully in peacetime commitments, and the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars.

For three and a half decades I had served as a squadron pilot in three different squadrons, a flying instructor, a squadron

commander, a commanding officer (twice), a staff officer (twice), a station commander, an AOC (twice), a chief instructor, a commandant, raised two new units and attended flying/staff courses in India and abroad. In 1986 the air force opened up an opportunity for me to exit. After a most fulfilling career and in my 54th year, I was happy to avail of this opening and move into the corporate world. Today, 31 years later, the sight and sound of aircraft from a nearby air base, does generate nostalgia for the service I grew up in, yesterday's air force.