

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...



The Beginning

The jet era in India began in November 1948 with arrival of the Vampire jet fighter-bomber from the UK at Kanpur (*photo above from the records of Vayu.*) It was however only in mid-1949 that the first jet flight was formed with No.7 Squadron of the RIAF. At that point of time, my generation had just joined college and our knowledge of aviation was restricted to having seen propeller-driven aircraft during World War II and movies of various air aces. Newspaper reports and radio broadcasts explaining this revolutionary new means of aircraft propulsion caught our interest, imagination and spawned dreams of becoming a jet pilot!

In 1950, the FPSC (forerunner of the UPSC) invited young male Indians to appear for its entrance exam for a commission in the GD (P) / Flying Branch of the IAF. Along with a large number of my college mates I appeared for the same but not too many of us cleared it and numbers continued to reduce at the Selection / Medical Boards. Eventually just two of us from my college

joined the 48 other young lads from all over India in 1951 for our 18-month pilot training on Tiger Moths and Harvards. Of the 30 of us who graduated, 13 were sent on to do fighter conversion on Spitfire Mk.XIVs and Tempest IIAs. At the end of 1952, three of us coursemates reported on posting to No. 7 Squadron at Palam. We were barely out of our teens, had about 200 hours of flying, with stars in our eyes and yet never seen a jet aircraft before!

Type trainers, simulators and ejection seats were still of the future hence our training to fly these silver jets with twin booms comprised the study of pilots notes, briefings, familiarisation, tests by the senior pilots and ground handling. The 'solo check' consisted of a written test, fully-kitted strapping into the cockpit, manual depression of the booms to indicate take-off / landing aircraft attitude, supervised start-up, taxi to the runway, vital actions for Take Off followed by the first half of the T/O, last half of the landing and return to dispersal.

We were now cleared to do our very first solo on jet aircraft without ever having left the ground in one ! The next day of good weather I was launched solo and a senior pilot was the ATC (Air Traffic Control) to monitor and render help if required. The moment I ‘unstuck’ and got airborne, I immediately missed the familiar sight of the long fuselage / propeller in front which had hitherto helped in maintaining required aircraft attitude. I now found myself literally seated in the nose with the engine / propulsion behind me! After the initial few minutes, when the aircraft was actually flying the pilot ! I got the new feel and then began to enjoy flying a jet. After 30 minutes of handling overhead the airfield, I descended to base, did the mandatory overshoot followed by a full stop landing; the usual congratulations and celebrations at the bar followed.

I was even more elated than I had been after my very first solo in the Tiger Moth but for the first time I truly missed the presence of my flying instructor (as at AFA & CTU) who had patiently helped me analyse and learn from every solo sortie. Of course there were peers and seniors to help but I now realised the meaning of ‘self-learning’, that is analysis and learning from the experience(s) of self and others. This gradually develops skills, knowledge and self confidence. With more experience, one learns also that there is a very thin line between uncontrolled self-confidence and over-confidence. It comes to all of us and young fighter pilots need to recognise, respect and stay on the right side of this line where thought always instinctively precedes action in the cockpit. This is the real beginning of an aviator’s professional maturity.

“Be Remembered for Good”

Throughout service in the air force, we serve under a commanding officer (CO) in all ranks. The CO is the seniormost officer and is responsible for performance of his unit in attaining it’s task. For officers he is also the IO (Initiating Officer) for the ACR (Annual Confidential Report) and thus influences an officer’s career. COs

are selected for their demonstrated performance of professionalism, leadership and management skills. In training establishments, the CI (Chief Instructor) is the de facto CO.

I recently had the pleasant surprise of an overseas call from an old CO of mine. Since I am the same age as our air force, I estimated him to be well into his 90s. His memory was excellent and we enjoyed our reminiscences going back over half a century! As I have a hearing disability, I always request my wife to monitor my calls as I sometimes miss soft-spoken details. After the call she asked me if I remembered all the COs I had served under and, if so, to test my memory and list them. After a few errors / corrections, I did so and list them below :

1952 Zafar Shah: 1953-54 GK John/MPO Blake: 1955 JJ Bouche: 1955 WJ Fernandes: 1955-57 ED Masillamani/CA Neelkantan:1957-58 SA Hussain: 1959-60 BB Marathe: 1960-61 SA Hussain: 1961-62 DIM Springett: 1962-66 HN Bysak/DE Bouche/AL Bajaj/NC Suri: 1966-69 SR Powar/PM Wilson: 1969-72 HR Chitnis/TJ deSa/MS Dandekar: 1973-75 RC Suchanti: 1975 GK John: 1975-77 Randhir Singh: 1977-79 E Dhatigara/LM Katre: (1980 – Course Abroad – No CO): 1981-83 Mohinder Singh/K Balam: 1983-85 EPR Nair/Vir Narain: 1985-86 DA LaFontaine/MM Singh:

To readers from other than my air force generation, this medley of names will perhaps mean nothing, but I am able to put a face, personality and memory to each individual name. During this period of 34 years, I had 19 postings (four of which were for less than six months) and served under 29 COs (two names appear twice). 23 of them had a single-engined pilots background and include three air chiefs. The list also includes one transport pilot, three navigators and two army officers ranging in rank from Sqn Ldr to Air Mshl / Lt Gen. In the early years, like all junior officers, contact with the CO was close and personal as in a squadron. As one rose in rank, appointment and experience, this becomes less so and, in my last assignment, I never met either of my COs during the tenure at all.

Most of the officers I reported to directly were friendly, helpful and from whose varied backgrounds and experiences, I learned a great deal, both in the air and on the ground. Much of this learning was to be of help in my own six CO–appointments.

A recent advertisement in the media for a certain liquid product is promoted with the catchphrase, “Be Remembered for Good”. As a long- retired ex–CO (thrice) / Stn Cdr / AOC (twice) / Commandant, it appears to me that the slogan (from which the title for this anecdote is borrowed) is a pretty fair yardstick of one’s past performance !

(For readers who have enquired about previous issues of AAAs, please visit website – <http://www.vayuaerospace.in/ancient-aviator-anecdote.html>) 



In the photograph above with Vampire of the Aircraft Testing Unit at Poona are seen Wg Cdr H Moolgavkar, Sqn Ldr CD Subia, Fg OffGD Clarke, Fg OffGV Kuriyan and Flt Lt Micky Blake, some of whom were the COs mentioned.