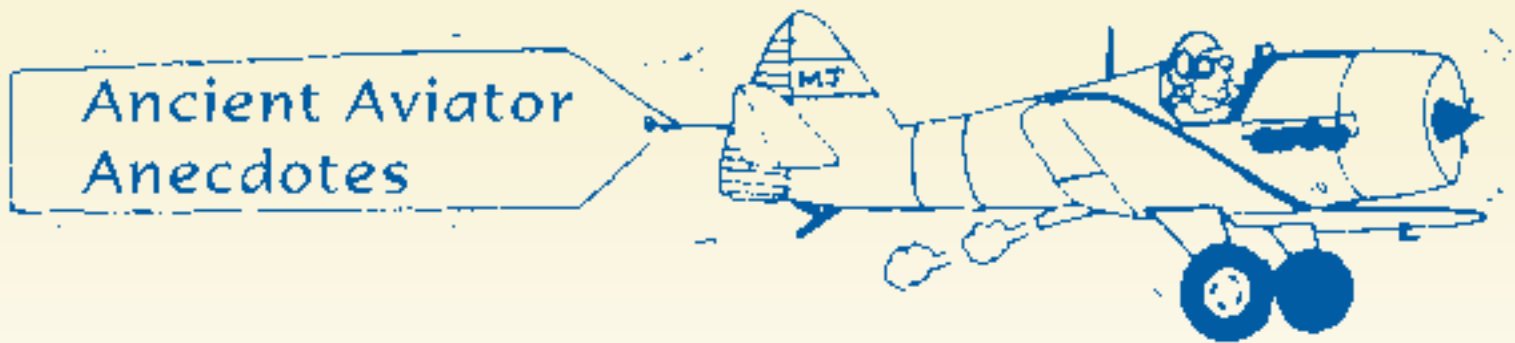


Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker's



“Last of the Hunters”

The very nature of aviation requires its practitioners to remain constantly on the right side of the learning curve! Consequently, aviators (even long retired ones like this writer) can never ignore news of an air crash anywhere in the world. On 22 August 2015, while in London on a visit, I caught the tail end of a TV news broadcast which described a plane crash during an air display to mark the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. What drew my immediate attention was that the aircraft was a Hawker Hunter. This type is now near sixty years old and was part of our own air force for some forty years.

I had special personal interest having flown the Hunter for ten consecutive years (1962-72) in peace and war. I was naturally interested in the cause factors for the crash of one of the safest, reliable and most delightful aircraft ever designed and built. The UK Air Accident Investigation Board, in its interim report, stated that ‘the aircraft was too low in a looping manoeuvre’ and crashed killing eleven bystanders and injuring more on the A-27 motorway in one of Britain’s worst air show disasters. Amazingly the pilot was pulled out alive from the blazing wreckage in critical condition.

The 51-year-old pilot had flown Harriers in the RAF, had over 14,000 flying hours with British Airways and had 40 hours of experience on the Hunter. He held a valid display authorisation issued by the UK CAA to “display the Hunter to a minimum of 500 feet agl during standard

category aerobatic manoeuvres.” From the many amateur and professional pre-impact video footage repeatedly aired, I could immediately identify the unmistakable silhouette of the Hunter (Trainer) in a near vertical attitude above the tree line. The pilot has an excellent professional reputation but apparently misjudged his height and got into an aerodynamic stall too low.

While in the UK I was in personal touch with some of the ex-IAF officers settled there. They included an ex-squadron commander, ex-station commander cdr, old flying instructor, fellow fighter pilot and a coursemate, three of whom themselves too were experienced Hunter pilots. Our conversation was therefore dominated by news of the Shoreham Air Show disaster and we recalled our own many ‘errors of judgement’ and lessons learnt therefrom including one in which this writer was lucky to survive sixty years ago in another aircraft type.

Over the years, 1957-97 our air force had seven Hunter-equipped units and I had the privilege of raising and commanding the IAF’s first Hunter Operational Training Unit (1966-69) and commanded No.20 Sqn (1969-72). Though this aircraft type was phased out before the millennium, the last vintage IAF Hunter was scheduled to participate in the Air Force Day Flypast to mark its 69th anniversary on 8 October 2001. Unfortunately, owing to bad weather, that flypast (to which I had been invited) had to be cancelled. I was however destined

to view on TV the dying shots of probably the last vintage RAF Hunter and be reminded once again that very rarely do aircraft cause accidents;—people do. The good news is that, on the day of our return, the pilot had recovered and been discharged from hospital.

A Doctor In The Air

In the air force, medical officers, though on the posted strength of squadrons, function directly under the Senior Medical Officer (SMO) of the air base where their squadron is located. As doctors they report professionally to the SMO and as officers, to the CO of their units. This dual reporting can be a trifle confusing to new doctors recruited directly from civilian medical colleges. Unlike their counterparts from the Armed Forces Medical College (AFMC), their introduction to the armed forces is a brief orientation course at the Army Medical Corp (AMC) Centre before donning uniform. In view of their relatively long training period, all medical officers are somewhat older at entry and are also granted a higher rank.

In 1970, a new medical officer from civvy street reported on posting to the squadron I was in - command of. I welcomed him, explained his role and hoped he would find time to interact with squadron personnel to guide and help them whether they required medical help or not. He seemed receptive but was still a bit uncomfortable in his new Flt Lt’s uniform. He told me he was married

but would be staying in the mess as his wife was to deliver a son soon. (I attributed his confident prediction of gender to his profession).

I received reports of our Doc's unhappiness with the 'unhygienic' conditions of our squadron tea club and flight crew room. I had a rather high spirited bunch of young officers at that time and our new medical officer seemed to resent being referred to as 'Doc' by them. Being a teetotaler he cautioned them against visiting the bar and threatened to have them 'grounded' if he felt they were imbibing unwisely. These veiled warnings resulted in some mischief when Doc's scooter was 'misplaced' and he received a telegram informing him of the birth of a son. Doc came around happily distributing sweets but three days later was in a disappointed mode when he received actual news of the birth of a daughter. I had to make special efforts to help him adjust to squadron life!

One afternoon I was required to carry out a routine air test on our Hunter trainer aircraft. There is a little known old IAF regulation that authorises medical officers to be given an air experience sortie on aircraft at their base. I spoke to my Flt Cdr and asked him to ascertain from our Doc if he was free and would like to fly. When I reached the aircraft I saw him fully kitted out in borrowed flying kit, briefed and ready for the very first flight in his life. He coped well, seemed to enjoy the experience and post-flight appeared a bit less judgmental and more friendly all round (I was informed the next morning our Doc conducted his sick parade wearing flying overalls)!

During the 1971 Indo Pak War, Doc, though with his leg in plaster owing to a scooter accident, stayed continuously with our pilots and technicians on the tarmac and blast pens in Pathankot helping in any way he could, a very valuable asset to the squadron indeed. A few months later when my own posting orders were received, he came to request my help in getting him a pair of flying overalls which strictly speaking he was not entitled to! I had an extra pair on which I had the squadron crest and a Hunter shoulder patch attached and gifted them to him.

Over the years Doc kept in touch and I learned that he had become a specialist and reached air rank. Years after we had both left the IAF we met in the NCR where

Doc was now a consultant in a corporate hospital. With great pride he told me that he had fathered three daughters, two of whom were in the medical profession. He enquired about each of the officers in our sqn by name. His prosperity was quite evident in his girth hence I fully understood his one regret; he could no longer fit into his flying overalls!

On Parade

The first words of command we aspiring flight cadets heard on reporting to the Air Force Academy (AFA) 64 years ago, were 'Fall In'. The joker in our boisterous young group of new arrivals, called back, 'Fall in to what yaar?' Our laughter died down when a tall uniformed person (we were yet to recognise ranks) identified the voice, came over and said in a slow measured tone, 'Fall into line Mr Whateveryournameis'. We 'fell in' and soon learned that air force pilot training also required a great deal of learning and discipline in the classroom, drill square and the Mess. We were soon drilling smartly on the parade ground, learned to take pride in our movements and turnout and put up a fine Passing Out Parade (POP) 18 months later.

In the IAF, Monday was observed as a Maintenance Day when there was no flying but the activities commenced with a compulsory station parade. We young squadron officers were detailed as 'supernumeries' in the rear rank. Not being a very exciting activity we sought to attend 'Sick Parade' on Monday mornings. The medicos marshaled all their resources and sent us back to the parade ground with advice to return after the parade if the sudden 'aches & pains' had not subsided by then! (No wonder I never saw an air force medical officer on parade!). As we grew in service and rank we graduated to being a Flight Commander, Squadron Commander and eventually the Parade Commander after which one only reviewed parades.

In March 1965 I was Flight Commander in a squadron based in Palam. We were told that His Highness (HH) Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh was arriving and that a Guard of Honour (GoH) was to be presented. Another squadron leader and I were detailed as 'Escort Officers' to HH while a wing commander was nominated as the GoH Commander. Hindi words of command had been introduced; our

wing commander (from the deep south) was fluent in Malayalam and English but a trifle hesitant in Hindi. He however soon memorised the words of command diligently and put up an impressive display at our two rehearsals. On the actual day, we escorted HH to the saluting dais to which the GoH Commander marched smartly and said in a loud parade-ground voice, '*Sammana garada aap ke nirikshen ke liye hazir hai shriman*'. HH leaned forward and said clearly, "Commander could you please repeat that in English?" For a fraction of a second time froze while the linguistic memory circuits of the three of us within earshot were working overtime! After a brief pause the Commander replied that the GoH was ready for inspection. The rest of the ceremony went off very well and, after HH having thanked us and departed, we heard the wing commander exclaim with feeling, "we must be the only armed forces in the world required to speak and think in two different languages simultaneously!"

In the late 1970s, as AOC Adampur I was somewhat surprised to receive a signal detailing me to attend the coming Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. Till then my only participation had been in several Flypasts from 'tail-end-charlie' on Vampires to leading the Hunter block. It turned out that a decision had been taken to include war decorated gallantry awardees in the parade. Accordingly six senior recipients of the Maha Vir Chakra (three from the army, two from the air force and one from the navy) were required to 'sit-to-attention' in two open jeeps in ceremonial uniform. We rather enjoyed the experience especially after passing India Gate when we hijacked the jeeps to the nearest Mess for much needed liquid refreshment.

As Commandant of the AFA in the 1980s my entire schedule stretched from one Graduation Parade (GP) to the next. Over the years GPs had added both style and substance by way of flypasts, aerobatics, para drops, band music, rifle drills and live commentaries all of which make for a spectacular event our air force can be proud of. Certainly quite a development from my simple POP in 1952 on conclusion of which, we heard a familiar voice call out 'Fall in Sirs' and our genial Drill Instructor (Sgt Krishnamurthy) came with a smile to congratulate us while still on parade.