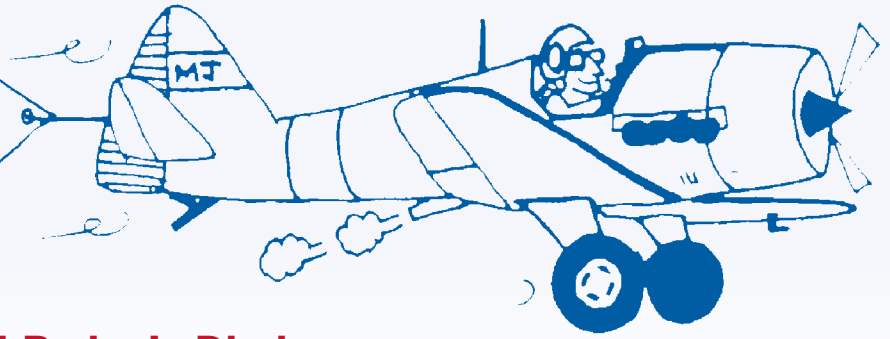


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



From Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker's Diaries



Hunters Over Staff College

The Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) Wellington in the Nilgiris is the oldest of our four major joint training establishments. Through their institutional specialisations, they aim to create and develop 'jointmanship', i.e. the integration of land, naval and air forces to achieve a common outcome. I had the good fortune of serving three tenures at DSSC spread over 20 years.

In 1960, as a young flight lieutenant, I was selected to attend the 14th Staff Course where I found myself the juniormost of 120 students. There were 82 in the Army wing, 14 in the Naval wing, 24 in the Air wing and included 20 foreign students plus two civilian officers from the IAS. It was my very first exposure to the other two Services and, for a year, was a great professional education. In addition, we made a large number of personal friends from all three arms of the Services; some of those friendships last well into retirement.

As a Wing Commander in 1973-75, I was posted to DSSC as a Directing Staff (DS) Air. As all instructors know, one learns most when one is teaching. In 1973, the JTC of the COSC had tasked Staff College to compile a new draft Joint Services Staff Duties Manual: Vol. 1 on Service Writing. From each of the wings, one member was nominated to form a three-member team under the chairmanship of the (then) CI Navy. I was appointed from the air force and, along with my two colleagues from the Army and the Navy, laboured hard for months, reconciling all our differences to create a draft publication that was well received by all vetting authorities and reached the JTC without a single amendment. What became of it I still do not know but years later (after we had both retired) I enquired about its fate from the erstwhile CI Navy (now a retired CNS) who, with an enigmatic smile observed that perhaps there was inadequate jointmanship at the required level! Within the Air Wing, I was also tasked to draft the

QRs for DS (Air) and these were accepted by Air HQ.

I was a beneficiary of these QRs when, as an Air Commodore, I returned to DSSC as the CI (Air) 1981-83. I had a well-qualified team at DS (Air), which relieved me of all routine duties and left me free to innovate, make future plans and improvements. One of the highlights of this tenure came about unexpectedly. In 1981, my old squadron (No.20) was chosen to form the IAF's first formation aerobatics team. The Hunter aircraft of the "Thunderbolts" mesmerised the country with their scintillating displays. In 1982, they happened to be based briefly at Coimbatore for display commitments down south. I knew the CO / Team Leader very well as he had also been a student at DSSC during my previous tenure. Since he was familiar with the layout / altitude of the institution, I asked him if he could carry out his rehearsal over Staff College between 1015-1030h the next day but above 7000 feet AMSL? He readily agreed and I got permission from the Commandant for this 'surprise' air display during the coffee break. I also took my two colleagues (the CIs Army and Navy) into confidence and we ensured that all students and staff were outside when six liveried Hunters, in a tight arrow-head formation, swept low and fast and went into their display mode in perfect weather conditions. Apart from the college, I think all residents of Wellington, Coonoor and surrounding areas gazed skywards quite fascinated at the magnificent air display on this, the first (and last) sight of the Hunters over Staff College. Those 15 minutes did a great deal for the Air Force too. The Commandant was delighted and immediately invited the team up to DSSC. In his vote of thanks during their felicitation, he made special mention of their fine visual example of teamwork and 'jointmanship' in the broadest meaning of the word.

My last appointment in the IAF was as AOC J&K 1985-86, in which assignment



I had to work closely with the Army's Northern Command almost daily and occasionally with its Western Command whenever joint exercises / operations involved J&K. I like to think that my successful tenure there was due largely to the fact that both army commanders happened to have been my coursemates at DSSC 25 years earlier!

A Moveable Feast

An aviator's logbook is a record of data pertaining to details of his or her time in the air. However, for long retired octogenarian pilots (like this writer), it also serves as a memory box of events, people and places. The December 1969 entries in my logbook refer to an exercise code named *Ice Kool II* organised by HQ WAC. I had recently taken over command of my old squadron, equipped with Hunter Mk.56A aircraft, based at Hindan (near Ghaziabad) and was instructed to operate a detachment of six aircraft from a disused World War II airfield called Sirsa located on the western edges of present day Haryana.

Other than a runway with a couple of 'soft' blast pens at either end and a small tarmac, Sirsa had no facilities and was looked after by a Care & Maintenance (C&M) Unit commanded by a young navigator and a small team of airmen. We had therefore to be self-sufficient operationally, administratively and maintenance wise. Our advance party stressed the requirement to clean all operating areas, as there was danger of FOD (Foreign Object Damage) to our engines. I led six

aircraft with 45 personnel and we spent the first 48 hours sweeping the tarmac, runway, blast pens and pitching tents! Our task for the exercise was counter air strikes on airfields and air defence of our own air base.

Our technicians kept all six aircraft serviceable and we did great deal of productive flying. Our squadron catering arrangements were of necessity vegetarian but determined personnel soon discovered a *dhaba* in 'downtown' Sirsa owned and operated by an ex-Army veteran with the unforgettable name of Sheermal Singh. Most evenings (after some 'spiritual' sustenance) a large number of us wound up at his establishment and he was delighted with the business he generated with his delectable non-veg fare. Army-Air co-op could get no better!

On the third day, widespread bad weather over the entire exercise area interrupted flying totally. We had brought along indoor games and a cricket set and soon a spirited limited overs match was in progress on the tarmac long before the BCCI/IPL laid down the rules! Suddenly we all heard the drone of propeller driven engines and looking up, caught glimpses of a transport ac through the clouds. The CO C&M Unit borrowed my jeep and raced off to our ATC (Air Traffic Control) and soon we saw a C-119 Packet land, taxi and switch-off adjacent to our cricket game. From the approaching jeep stepped a familiar figure – none other than our AOC-in-C WAC! I knew him very well as

he flew with us on occasion. On receiving him, his first query was what the score was! His aircraft, returning from a forward area supply drop mission had not been cleared to his destination, which was temporarily closed owing to weather. Being close to Sirsa, which they could see through the cloud cover, they decided to put down.

He insisted on sitting through the rest of our game and accepted my invitation to have lunch at Sheermal Singh's *dhaba*. While I debriefed him on the progress of the exercise of the squadron detachment, an advance party was quietly sent off to alert the eatery! On arrival, he was pleasantly surprised to receive a military salute, a warm welcome and the unusual sight of a *dhaba* table covered with a tablecloth adorned with crockery, cutlery and glassware. He certainly enjoyed the food, which (perhaps in honour of his visit) was somewhat richer than usual. In the afternoon he was able to take off and was kind enough to give two of my airmen a lift to Delhi, as they were required back at base.

Late that evening I received a call from his Staff Officer to say that (post-lunch) the AOC-in-C was 'temporarily indisposed' but wished to convey his thanks for our hospitality. At the formal debrief of Ex *Ice Kool II* he commended the squadron's performance but understandably made no mention of his enforced stop-over in Sirsa. *Postscript: Only five other pilots will recall our farewell flypast over Sirsa town on 19 December 1969!*