

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...



The Vampire at the IAF museum at New Delhi

A Non-Surgical Strike

In mid-August this year, some unexpected events occurred in rapid succession. I experienced sudden and severe pain in my upper right thigh which my wife and I felt was an attack of sciatica. When it worsened, we sought medical help and were advised to have an immediate x-ray of the right hip joint. Though the x-ray was normal, it did indicate some wear and tear in the joint owing to my age. I was referred to the army orthopedist (AO) at MH who was very helpful and listened patiently to my symptoms, i.e. pain (location/intensity/duration) while studying the x-ray. He concluded that it was a case of osteoarthritis and gave me two options. Either (a) Have an operation to replace the right hip joint, or (b) Cope with the pain. I explained that,

at the ripe old age of 86 years, I was not too keen to undergo any invasive surgery and would prefer help to cope with the pain, at least to begin with. He immediately prescribed the necessary medication and added, 'Cts-O4wks' (more on this later).

We are grateful to the large number of friends and well wishers who got in touch and called over to share, not only their concern, but also own medical experiences of a similar nature. One of our own granddaughters, herself a doctor in the UK undergoing specialisation, came up on skype to assure me of the safety and ease of this surgery now very common with elders of my vintage. We learned a great deal from all the advice and support we received and also obtained a second opinion at a well known

corporate hospital whose orthopedist fully endorsed our AO's diagnosis and suggested some additional medication. The ingestion of all this pain killer medication however, followed the law of unintended consequences and generated side effects, i.e. loss of appetite, feeling of weakness and numbing of lower extremities in both legs. When this was brought to the attention of our AO, he immediately stopped all medication, left me a small supply in case of emergency, and asked me to report again after four weeks or an 'SOS' if required.

With the stoppage of all medication, I braced myself to cope with the reappearance of pain but miraculously there was none, the side effects gradually wore off and I returned to normal life again – at a pace dictated

by my age. With my next appointment with the AO coming up, I asked my many doctor-friends as to just what 'Cts-O4wks' meant; they were almost unanimous in interpreting it as a requirement for a CT Scan in four weeks. I reported to the AO who was happy at the absence of pain, disappearance of the side effects and my return to normality. I then asked him as to whether I was still required to have the CT scan endorsed in his original prescription? He laughed and said it was only a medical shorthand for 'ConTinue Same for four weeks'!

It is possible that my experience might be of help to some elderly readers of the AAA column, hence have encapsulated the events of the past six weeks into this Anecdote. At the time of writing, I still have the emergency painkiller medication unused ('Just in Case') and am back to normal life with no pain which I hope to Cts till final take off for the aviator's Valhalla in the sky!

Reflections on a blue shirt

Because it is associated with our graduation, my memories in the month of August invariably return to our trainee pilot days. In early 1951 fifty of us young lads, most of whom were straight out of school / college, reported to No. 1 Air Force Academy (AFA) in Ambala and formed No 58 Pilots Course (PC). A new Indian Air Force (IAF) was being built up on the remains of World War II aircraft while simultaneously inducting our very first jet aircraft, ie the Vampire Mk 52. At that time Ambala housed our Flying Instructors School (FIS), the Conversion & Training Unit (CTU) equipped with Spitfire MK IX & Tempest II A for the Applied stage of training and the Advanced & Basic stages of flying training on Harvard II B and Tiger Moth respectively, each of 9 months duration.

A few of us new coursemates with a boarding school background, were comfortable with the rules, regulations and routine of life at the AFA. The daily schedule divided itself into ground subjects in the class room, drill on the parade square and flying in the fabric-covered, propeller-driven biplane in which the instructor sat in the front and the pupil at the back. As a youth used to regular games in the evenings, I was a little disappointed at the lack of facilities or emphasis on organised team games. However, our Chief Ground Instructor (CGI) was a keen tennis player and, a couple



The Hawker Tempest Mk2 seen here at the IAF museum at New Delhi

of us flight cadets who played the game, were invited occasionally to play at the Sirhind Club. After the initial 'breaking-in' period, as in any military training unit, we were permitted to 'book-out' on weekends but only in uniform. Apart from a change from mess food at the Deluxe Dhaba, there was really not very much to do in the Ambala of those days.

We had barely commenced our flying training when it was decided to relocate all air force training down south and build Ambala up as an operational base. We were given a months leave and instructed to report to a place called Secunderabad down south. The Advanced and Basic stages were now at Begumpet airfield, the Applied stage at Hakimpet while FIS was relocated to Tambaram. We recommenced our flying training and I was most fortunate to be a pupil of Navroze Lalkaka. He not only taught my co-pupil and self in the cockpit but took equal interest in developing our soft skills with great patience. He had the gift of making us really enjoy the act of flying while learning it's skills and, for me, continued to remain a mentor and friend to the end.

Financially we flight cadets were restricted to Rs 40 per month for our personal expenses; this amount was remitted directly from our homes to the CGI's office. While this amount was more than adequate in Ambala, Secunderabad offered more activities but we managed as the cost of living was not unreasonable. For example: on booking-out days I cycled to the home

of the young lady I was courting, was given permission to invite her for the matinee show followed by a dosa-and-coffee at our 'Taj'; all for just under Rs 5 for two! Meanwhile our flying training took us into the Advanced stage where standards were equally strict. With a wastage of 40%, only 30 of us won our wings and were commissioned on 30 August 1952. 66 years later, 10 of us aged mid-to-late 80s are very much around – at least at the time of writing! It may be of interest to mention that, the flight cadets of today get a stipend of Rs 56,100 per month from the government!

On a personal note, the most important event during my training days was meeting the aforementioned young lady who, though three years my junior in age, drew her first salary as a teacher in St. Georges Grammar School Hyderabad six months before I did as a Pilot Officer – a rank now defunct. From her first pay she gifted me a blue shirt. We married in 1956 and she has been my constant companion and support through 13 postings in 30 years while raising two wonderful children, teaching, running a home and waiting patiently for the many years it took to build our own house. Now in the 63rd year of our marriage we enjoy our quiet retirement blessed with good health, family, friends and finances that enable us to help others less fortunate in life. Though it of course no longer fits me, the blue shirt is still in my wardrobe as a symbol of the best thing that ever happened to me since my flight cadet days.