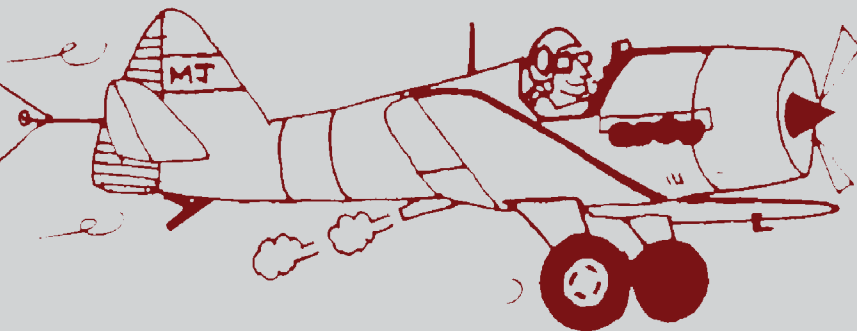


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects....

No Sense of an Ending

It was the summer of 1953 and the three of us coursemates (Veekay, Granny and self) had completed our Vampire conversion, commenced our operational training, but were still the juniormost sprogs in No. 7 Squadron at Palam. The good news was that a signal had been received posting in a new set of juniors and we three keenly looked forward to handing over our onerous secondary duties (O i/c Tea Club / Pay Parade / Crew Room etc) to the incoming new pilot officers!

The better news was that we had just received some arrears of Flying Bounty and were feeling rich! Veekay, who hailed from UP, suggested that we make a trip to Naini Tal where an uncle of his would do our hotel bookings. We asked for and were granted a few days of casual leave and were given Form Ds to a railhead called Kathgodam. We hired a taxi for our very first visit to Naini Tal where we checked into what would be called today, a 'starred' hotel full of Indian and foreign guests escaping the heat of the plains.

Life centred around the lake and we enjoyed ourselves in the scenic surroundings. On return from one of our excursions we passed through a room in the hotel equipped for table tennis where two young foreign girls were attempting to play. The older one (no more than 10-12 years of age) in a very English accent asked us if we knew how to play 'ping pong' and if so, would we please play with her as her young companion was of no use. We were happy to oblige till some time later a balding, elderly foreign gentleman, came and escorted them away.

Later at lunch we saw the two children as part of a somewhat large family party



*Air Marshal GE Gibbs in Vampire FB.52
of No. 8 Squadron*

at another table. At the end of lunch, the same gentleman, along with the two girls approached our table and we stood up. He introduced himself as Gibbs and came to thank us for looking after and entertaining the two young ladies. He then casually enquired if we were on holiday, to which Veekay (the seniormost of us) announced with some pride that we were "fighter pilots on leave". The gentleman paused awhile and then with a smile shook hands with each of us and wished us happy landings before returning to his table. Two days later, while checking out we read that an Air Marshal

Gibbs with his family had checked out ahead of us.

On return to our squadron we related this encounter to our seniors and were mortified to learn that he was none other than the C-in-C of the IAF! We had been taught that on 15 August 1947, the RIAF had become an independent organisation whose first three Chiefs were Air Marshals of the RAF on secondment. Air Marshal GE Gibbs was the third C-in-C of the IAF from 1951 (when we had joined the air force) till 31 March 1954 when he handed over to the very first Indian CAS, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee who had commissioned us 18 months earlier. Though we did not know names, we did feel proud that we three had shaken hands with 'our' first air chief, even if it was done unwittingly!

Of the first ten Indian air chiefs that covered my years in the IAF, I had personally interacted with eight as I did my growing up in the air force. The tenth Indian CAS was from No. 51-52 Pilots Course and we had known each other near 30 years but had never worked together. In fact the only professional interaction we had was in late 1977 when I took over the command of our base in Adampur from him. It was during his tenure as the CAS that he opened up an option for me to take premature retirement in 1986. It had been a wonderful three and a half decades that had enabled a very ordinary young man to experience some extraordinary and unforgettable moments in the air and on the ground in peace and war. For personal reasons I was more than happy to separate from the air force with no sense of an ending – or even a handshake.

A MEDICAL TRIBUTE



Four years ago, now in our early 80s, my wife and I experienced some cloudiness in our eye-vision and reported to the eye specialist at our MH (Military Hospital). He was most helpful, had our eyes tested fully and informed us that it was quite normal at our age to require cataract removal and lens replacement. Sensing the unspoken apprehension in this elderly couple, he

assured us that no hospitalisation was necessary, the operation itself was no more than 30 minutes and was a perfectly routine one. He however advised us not to delay much longer and encouraged us to seek a second opinion.

As we knew no eye specialist, we sought help from our doctor friend and next door neighbour, herself a retired army surgeon. She suggested that we see her brother-in-law, also ex-army, who was an eye specialist residing in the neighbouring colony and offered to seek an appointment for us. We were received most warmly by the eye surgeon and his wife who put us at ease while he carried out his own tests and examination. His independent diagnosis was entirely supportive of the MH eye specialist. Whilst the ladies were organising coffee, I took him aside to pay his fee. He laughed it off and said I had already paid him.

I was adamant and reminded him that I had no recollection of money changing hands. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Sir, to have a Maha Vir Chakra awardee in my home and under my treatment is an honour and privilege for me". This sentiment, expressed so sincerely by a (then) near-stranger, touched me greatly. I expressed my thanks, we shook hands and rejoined the ladies without any further reference to our private conversation. On our return drive, my wife casually asked me as to what fee I had paid. I merely told

her that he would accept no money from a brother officer.

We returned to the eye specialist at the MH who, learning that we lived alone, thoughtfully programmed four separate dates for our operations so that we could help each other post surgery. Both our children abroad offered to come and 'baby-sit' us but we felt quite capable of managing. Both my operations went off very well and my experience gave great confidence to my wife. When she went in for her first surgery, it was my turn to sit in the waiting room of the OT (Operation Theatre). She came out accompanied by the eye surgeon himself who assured me that the operation had gone off very well and she would be fine. He then took me aside and, with a twinkle in his eye, told me, "Sir your wife is the only patient I've had who, on the operating table, advised me on how to perform the surgery!". We both burst out laughing and I informed him not to worry as for years she had advised me on how to fly ("low and slow") and I had survived! We had both not only regained our normal eye sight, but made new friends from the medical fraternity.

Alas, life is uncertain and last month we had the sad experience of joining the large number of friends and family at the Memorial Meeting for the late medical officer who had so forthrightly expressed his personal admiration for gallantry awardes - a tribute I shall always remember. 🇮🇳



Vampire NF Mk.54s of No.10 Squadron, then based in Palam, in formation flight over a very new New Delhi. (Do readers recognize some iconic landmarks?)