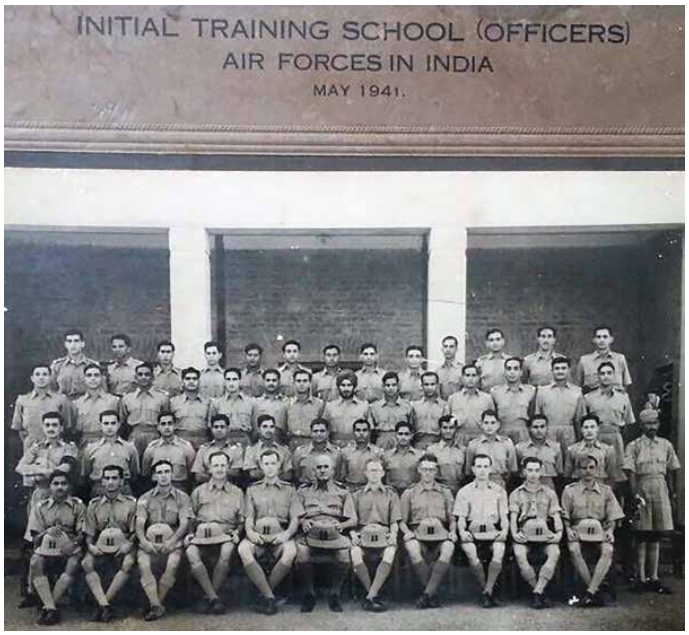
My IAF Training Days 1941

By Air Marshal AR Pandit PVSM AVSM DFC



No. 8 Pilots Course – Pandit standing 6th from right, last but one row.

At the end of every year, it is customary to take stock of achievements and failures gone by. A yearly balance sheet is a relatively simple matter but how does one go about it when a period of over 3 decades has to be covered?

There are some who meticulously maintain a diary, for them it is a straightforward process. I do not belong to that class, so I have to rely entirely on my memory. But believe you me when the dam bursts open, the memories start rolling down and are so crystal clear that every little detail is projected on the screen of your mind.

A young man in June 1940, at Indore, still at large, groping in the dark for that ray of kindly light to lead his way. Having decided wisely or otherwise not to pursue his college studies only to come up eventually in the queue, to join the "Baboos". Having decided to do some vocational training instead and completing short courses in Radio Communication and Electrical Engineering, the young man found himself at a loose end. All avenues appeared closed due to the War which was only a few months old. All avenues? No, not all, for there was a demand for young men to join the Defence Forces. So, this young man decided to take the plunge and that young man was me.

At that time my father was an honorary Lt Col in the Holkar army. Although a civilian officer he was required to wear a uniform. I remember having stared at that starched khaki uniform many a times and wondered if I would be lucky to find myself in one some time. Because of my father's rank and position I did enjoy some privileges. One of them being the use of the Cavalry horses for riding. I went regularly every evening for riding. I always dressed myself in riding breeches and made sure that the Rajput turban which I tied was at the cockiest angle possible. I had also arranged with my riding master, the timings, in such a manner, that I would always pass the Girl's High School when the girls were coming out of their school gate. What a terrific delight I took when the girls tried to get away from the path we came trotting by. Major General Carpendale was the C–in–C of the Holkar Army and always appreciated my riding whenever he happened to be around. As a matter of fact, he was the one to goad me into applying for a commission in the Indian Army. He got my application forwarded to the Army HQ at Simla. I also applied for commission in the Air Force.

By July there was no news from the Army HQ or the Air Force. What was I to do? My father advised me to fill forms at the college, which was just opening after the summer vacation. I too thought that it was better to do that than sitting idle. So I joined The Indore Christian College and started attending classes. Then came the telegram from the Director General of Civil Aviation to appear before an interview board at Bombay. This was for pilot's training. The Civil Aviation Dept. was training pilots for eventual entry into the Air Force. A team consisting of about 5 members were going all over the country, interviewing young men and selecting them for pilot's training at the various flying clubs. As soon as the call was received, there was strong opposition from all my relatives, friends and well–wishers. Going to war was bad enough but going for military flying was worse than committing suicide, they said. My father was the only person who left the decision to me. So I pacified the old ladies of the family by saying that I was only going for an interview. With their blessings (I might not even be selected) if I was, the choice of proceeding for training would also be with me so why start mourning about it from now?

For the first time in my life, I travelled alone by train to Bombay. I stayed in a lodge opposite the Dadar railway station. The interview was in the Fort area. The interview board was known as the Ginwala Committee after the name of its President. One of the members of the board was Flt Lt S Mukerjee of the Air Force. Not having appeared before any selection boards earlier, I should have been but was somehow not at all scared. This may have been more due to my ignorance than anything else. Or perhaps I could not care whether I was selected or not, making me frank and fearless. I was also not quite used to conversing in English. However, I must have fared well because I was asked to go for the medical examination immediately after the interview.

Oh, yes! I must narrate an incident here. The President