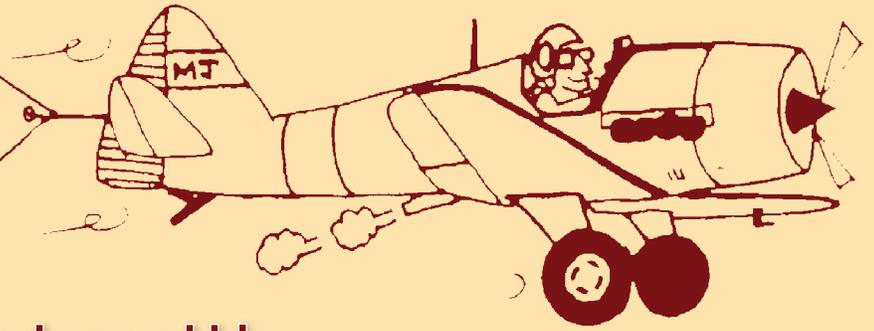


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker and his

MEMORIES ENCAPSULATED

Like many of us in our late 80s, I occasionally experience a temporary loss in short-term memory. On the other hand, long-term memory is fairly clear and appears to be preserved in capsules of time-place-event in specified periods. My air force service spanned 35 years (1951-86) during which period I had 19 postings of which four were for less than six months each and one was for a year while on course abroad. Geographically my postings were in J&K (Udhampur), Punjab (Pathankot/Adampur), Haryana (Ambala), Delhi (Palam), Uttar Pradesh (Hindon), Rajasthan (Jodhpur), Gujarat (Jamnagar), Andhra/Telangana (Begumpet/ Hakimpet/ Dundigal), Karnataka (Bengaluru) and Tamil Nadu (Tambaram/Wellington). In the operational role I served at air bases all in the western sector and in the training role at establishments in the southern sector.

Looking back I realise that 80% of my postings were on airfields, 15% in class rooms and 5% on staff assignments. The

aircraft I flew as captain were the Tiger Moth, Harvard IIB/T6G, Spitfire Mk IX, Tempest IIA, Vampire, Toofani (Ouragan), HT-2, Prentice, Devon, Dakota, Hunter, T-39A (Saberliner), Gnat, Marut, Kiran, Chetak, Iskra, MiG-21 and Krishak. As a co-pilot I flew the F-100F Super Sabre, Hawk, Harrier, Akbar, MiG-23 and the Jaguar. My log book tells me that over 40% of my total flying hours were on one single aircraft type (Hunter) on which I was employed for 10 consecutive years (1962-72) as a flight commander, then as the founding CO&CI of the IAF's first OTU and thereafter as CO of No. 20 Squadron. Thanks to my varied postings though, I was one of the few fighter pilots who had the opportunity to qualify on both twin engine and rotary-wing platforms.

My generation was part of the air force's transition from piston engines to jets, subsonic to supersonic regimes, single engine to twin/multi engine aircraft and fixed wing to swing/rotary wing

airborne platforms. Changes in technology, availability of aviation resources and threats shaped our training and tactics. Certainly Indian military air power came of age after the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars. It is likely that every military aviator has a personal cache of unforgettable moments in the air. My own would undoubtedly include the bale-out from a blazing Tempest in 1952; the landing of a Hunter Mk 56A with three external tanks one of which was a live hang-up napalm bomb in 1970; the recovery to Pathankot after the Hunter gun strike on Peshawar at sunrise on 4 December 1971.

Sixty nine years ago, as a teenager barely out of college, I joined the IAF for one simple reason – I wanted to fly. The air force trained me to become a fighter pilot and, thanks to all those postings and aircraft types, one gradually learned the skills, knowledge and gained the experience needed by the service. It was the acquisition of these professional attributes that contribute to the capsule of happy memories in the cockpit.



Hawker Hunter Mk. 56 of the IAF

GONE – BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

In any profession, one source of information is invariably a more experienced or senior individual. In the air force we interact daily with colleagues, seniors and juniors both in the air and on the ground. This interaction can and should enhance one's own professional or personal skills, knowledge and experience. Topping the list of the many seniors I have learned from, are six air force officers who helped me grow up in the IAF.

In 1951-52, I was a flight cadet and extremely fortunate to have had Navroze Lalkaka as my flying instructor. He loved flying and inculcated this attribute in his pupils while imparting skills and knowledge in the cockpit, classroom or club. It was a great pleasure learning from this patient, talented and dedicated teacher. My guru-shishya relationship with Gp Capt N Lalkaka continued into retirement.

During the same period, Sunil Mukherjee was our CGI (Chief Ground Instructor). A gifted tennis player, my own love for the game brought us together on the tennis court. Off court he was a teacher par excellence of OLQs (Officer Like Qualities) and stressed a great deal on values and ethics. I never worked under him again but we remained in touch and he responded warmly to any advice I sought from him over the years. His late night congratulatory call, from Jalahalli to Pathankot, was the very first I received when my MVC was announced in December 1971. In 2004, I was able to visit an ailing Gp Capt Mukherjee in Kolkata; three weeks later he passed away.

In 1955-57 I was a young (and admittedly somewhat immature) QFI on my first instructional tour at Jodhpur. On one sortie I disregarded a rule and damaged an aircraft. The damage was repaired but I was marched before Pratap Lal the then AOC Training Command. After pronouncing my punishment, he called me in, sat me down with a cup of tea and gave me a talk I have never forgotten. He reminded me of the great cost and trust the air force had invested in me. As the CAS he attended my investiture in Rashtrapati Bhavan in January 1972 and personally walked over to congratulate me. In 1980, I was selected to attend the RCDS course in London but travel sanction for family was not given. I went to see ACM PC Lal, the then Chairman of Air India and he arranged the same for me within my budget. In his memoirs, 'My Years in the IAF', he was kind enough to include my leadership in the counter air strikes during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

Sham Powar was an instructor when I was a flight cadet and my flight commander in my first squadron (No.7) on Vampires. We came together in Jamnagar in 1966 where he was the Station Commander and I was posted as a wing commander to raise and command the IAF's first OTU on Hunter aircraft. He was not only a great support and help but I learned a great deal on effective leadership from this fine officer and gentleman. Our professional relationship grew into a personal friendship and we spent happy holidays with Gp Capt and Mrs Powar at their farm in Bengaluru and remained in touch till he passed on.

I have had the privilege of flying with some truly gifted pilots. Pete Wilson was certainly one of them. He too was a QFI when I was a pilot trainee, and a pioneer Canberra pilot. In 1968 he took over command of Jamnagar and continued the professional help I received from his predecessor. A man of few words, he led from the front and I learned a great deal of leadership in the air from him. I had the embarrassment of converting him on to Hunter; in a few sorties he was handling the aircraft better than me! He too became a personal friend and our relationship continued in the UK where he had settled and was employed with Scotland Yard and I was attending a course. Air Cmde PM Wilson, Vr C could never hide his nostalgia for the IAF.

As a very effective CAS, successful ambassador and state governor, ACM Idris Latif requires no introduction. Though I had known him from his Wg Cdr days, my first interaction with him was in 1975 when, as a Gp Capt I was posted to command the air base at Hakimpet and had to induct 50 new Polish Iskra trainers. He was then the AOC-in-C Maintenance Command and flew down to spend a day with me to see how he could help as all maintenance and logistics of the aircraft was co-located on my base. As CAS he visited Adampur where I was the AOC in 1978-79. We both retired in Hyderabad where our personal relationship grew to a point where ACM IH Latif made himself 'Idris Bhai' to me. I was honoured and privileged to pay my tribute in the commemorative book on Idris and Bilkees Latif published in 2019.



Photograph by Peter Steinemann



Air Chief Marshal Idris Latif

All six have preceded this writer to the aviator's Valhalla but are remembered with great respect and gratitude. 🇮🇳