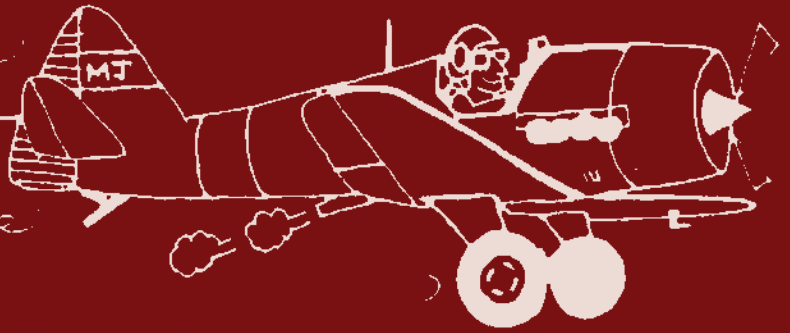


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal (R) Cecil Parker and.....

“LIGHTNING: ROLLING-ROLLING-NOW”



For air veterans of a certain vintage, the month of December will recall the 1971 Indo-Pak war. It was certainly the high point of my seven years with No.20 Squadron AF, four of which (1962-66) were as the flight commander on Hunter Mk.56 aircraft in Palam and three (1969-72) as the commanding officer on the Mk. 56A's in Hindan and Pathankot. The squadron which was formed in 1956 with Vampire Mk.52s, has a crest of three bars of lightning and a (translated) motto of 'Fast and Furious'. This has given the unit its name as the Lightning Squadron and its members are known as *Tribe Twenty*. During my two tenures, a fair number of personnel (pilots, technical/medical officers and airmen) passed through my hands and I, in turn, learnt a great deal from them both in the air and on the ground.

Recollection of identity-markers (rank, appointment, branch, service number, decorations) gradually fades with the passage of time. Better remembered is demonstrated performance and associated name. The collective performance of the *Lightning Squadron* in December 1971 is now recorded history during which my team comprised: JM Mistry: AA D’Rosario: KN Bajpai: GS Dhillon: BS Kailey: AL Deoskar: Arun Prakash (from the Navy, later CNS): Suraj Kumar: SS Gahlaut: AK Sharma: KP Murlidharan: S Balasubramaniam: T Chowfin: R Demonte: VK Heble: BC Karambaya: AAR Shirke: A Thapar: JPS Talwar: RS Pannu: augmented by the attachment of R Bharadwaj and Janak Kumar and supported so ably on the ground by Ajit Sahai: SR Sachdev: LK Kochar: KK Mukherjee: AK Sood: SV Ashok plus 335 air warriors of all trades.

Over the past near half-century, the 28 names listed above have been reduced by a few who have joined the two we lost during the war. *Tribe Twenty* members of 1971 vintage have had some Getogethers and a major Reunion at Navy House New Delhi in 2005 kind courtesy of the then CNS himself a distinguished ex-Tribesman (*see picture*). Some members of the team met up at the presentation of the President’s Colours to No.20 Squadron at Kalaikunda in 1992. For me personally it was a few nostalgic moments to climb into the cockpit of a parked Hunter after 20 years! The two other occasions some of us met up again were at the Squadron’s Gold and Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 2006 and 2016 respectively in Pune where it is now equipped with Su-30 MKIs.





Thanks to the internet and the smart phone most of us continue to remain in touch periodically. But what this 88-year old great-grandfather finds difficult to picture is his (then) 20-something-year-old lively young officers as the septuagenarian grandfathers they must be now! One of their recent messages to me on my birthday, made my day. "Sir, among my abiding memories of my 20 Squadron days was the baritone voice of the boss on R/T calling 'Lightning: rolling-rolling-now' as we took off on yet another mission". Those were the days my friend.

Friends in uniform

Friendship stems from common interests, needs and proximity. If personal chemistry is also present, it makes for a stronger and longer relationship. To those of us who chose a career in the armed forces, a posting every two or three years had the potential for new friendships with colleagues from all corners of our country. In the air force it commences with our very first basic professional training course. In my own pilots course (1951-52) our comradeship and bonding as flight cadets led to friendships that have lasted many years.

As young pilots in squadrons, friendships with our peers grew out of our common need to learn new flying skills,

acquire knowledge and gain experience both in the air and on the ground. As we reached our first supervisory appointments (Flight Commander/Instructor) the requirements of training and discipline called for a fine balance between leadership and friendship. As a very young QFI (1955) I was barely much older than my first pupils and was able to bond more easily with them. Most of them became personal friends, a relationship I myself enjoyed with my own flying instructor.

As a commanding officer (Sqn Cdr/Stn Cdr/AOC/Commandant) the appointment called for some detachment and judgement to ensure that personal friendships are kept quite separate from professional relationships and is seen to be so. Three tenures at DSSC Wellington enlarged our circle of friends to include new ones from the army and navy. A years course abroad gave us many new friends from all three services from more than one country.

As a Station Commander in the 1970s, one of my wife's personal friends on the station had invited us to dinner. Unknown to either of the ladies, that same morning I had the unpleasant task of having to punish our hostess's husband. Yet we had a most pleasant evening together and our personal friendship was never affected. Some years later the officer died in a flying

accident; his widow still remains in close touch. On another occasion my wife and daughter, returning to India and travelling unaccompanied by me, missed their flight at Heathrow and returned to 'The Keep' in Kingston where we had already vacated and handed back our apartment. One of our friendly neighbours, a serving colonel in the British army (and a tennis playing family) immediately invited them into their home to stay. The nature of the profession encourages friendships in the armed forces in most countries.

Covid-19 sanctions have of course eliminated travel and confined us to our home, cut off physically from our two children and their families. Yet there has been a spurt of communications from old friends enquiring about our welfare and recollecting experiences ranging from youthful escapades to attainment of great-grandfatherhood! One of my oldest friends and coursemates (two years my senior) happens to share a birthday with me and was 90 on 22 November 2020. Thinking aloud, I wondered what I could send him as a present? The advice from my best friend was that I should send a birthday message emphasising how greatly I value his friendship of near 70 years. And fortunate indeed is the man (in uniform or otherwise) whose wife is also his best friend! 🦋